

ABDACOM: AMERICA'S FIRST COALITION EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR II

by

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Abstract

On December 7, 1941 the Japanese Empire launched a surprise attack on the United States at the Pearl Harbor naval base in the territory of Hawaii. The following day President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared war on Japan, and America was suddenly an active participant in a global war that had already been underway for over five years. World War II pitted the Axis (Japan, Germany, and Italy) against a coalition of allied nations that were united primarily by fear of Axis totalitarianism. Typically referred to as the Allies, the alliance's most powerful participants included the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. However, many other nations were involved on the Allied side. Smaller European countries such as Holland, Belgium, and Poland fought with armed forces and governments in exile located in London after their homelands had been overrun by the Germans in 1939 and 1940. China had been at war with Japan since 1937. After the United States entered the war, allied action resulted in the creation of different, localized military coalitions between 1941 and 1945. These coalitions presented Allied leaders with unique problems created by the political, geographic, military and logistical issues of fighting war on a global scale. The earliest coalition in which the United States was involved was known by the acronym ABDACOM, short for the American, British, Dutch, Australian Command. ABDACOM's mission was the defense of the Malay Barrier, which stretched from the Malay Peninsula through the Dutch East Indies to New Guinea, and the protection of the Southwest Pacific Area from Japanese invasion.

In its brief two-month existence the ADBA coalition in the Southwest Pacific Area failed to prevent the Japanese from taking the Malay Barrier, Singapore, Burma and the islands between Java and the Philippines. This was due not to one overriding problem, but to a

combination of planning, command, and logistical problems, compounded by the distance of Allied production and training centers from the front lines. These problems can be traced from the late 1930s to the dissolution of ABDACOM at the end of February 1942.

Historians have often overlooked the underlying causes of the United States' first foray into coalition warfare in World War II. To better understand why the Allied forces succumbed to the Japanese onslaught so quickly, one must look at political, military and economic relations between the United States and its allies prior to the onset of hostilities in 1941. Domestic political realities combined with international diplomatic differences kept the United States from openly preparing for coalition action until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The ensuing military coalition suffered from numerous deficiencies in command structure and logistics. Though pre-war planning existed within each of the Allied governments, the lack of cooperative action gave the Japanese military an insurmountable military advantage over the members of the ABDA coalition.

Given the limited scope of this paper the focus will be on American participation in ABDACOM. The other countries involved will be included inasmuch as they help to fill out the story of the United States and its first coalition effort in World War II. The story of the ABDACOM coalition is one of perseverance, creative planning, and deep stoicism in the face of overwhelming odds. The short life of the coalition gave planners in Washington, D.C. and London time to sort out potential conflicts between the Allies.

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Acronyms List

ABC-1	American, British, Canadian planning conference, 1941
ABDA	American, British, Dutch, Australian Coalition members
ABDACOM	ABDA command
ABDAAIR	ABDA air force command
ABDAFLOAT	ABDA naval command
ABDAGROUND	ABDA ground force command
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff (U.S./U.K.)
FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (U.S.)
N.E.I.	Netherlands East Indies
R.A.F	Royal Air Force
R.A.A.F.	Royal Australian Air Force
RNN	Royal Netherlands Navy
USS	United States Ship

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production of this work would have been less enjoyable. Any errors that have made it to the published copy of this essay are mine and mine alone.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Mark Yates, who, in addition to being one of the best friends that any person could hope to have, was one of the strongest human beings I have had the pleasure of knowing. Mark's ability to keep on fighting against all odds was nothing short of incredible. His example was inspiring and kept me working on this essay even when I felt overwhelmed. His spirit continues to inspire me every day. Thank you Mark for being a shining beacon in the dark. Go, Fight, Win.

Introduction



Figure 1. Map of the ABDACOM Theater Showing the Subcommand Areas.

Image courtesy of the U.S. Army.

On February 28, 1942 the heavy cruiser USS *Houston* and the light cruiser HMAS *Perth*, two of the last surviving Allied warships north of the Sunda Strait which separates the islands of Java and Sumatra, set sail from the Tanjong Priok naval base at Batavia.¹ Their destination was the safe haven of Australia. Captain Albert H. Rooks commander of the USS *Houston*, and senior commander Captain Hector Waller of the *HMAS Perth*, had orders from the ABDA naval commander, Dutch Admiral Conrad Helfrich, to sail southwest, through the Sunda Strait, and make a run for Australia.² British intelligence officers in Batavia assured both commanders that there was no Japanese naval presence in the area.³ Rooks and Waller had no idea they were sailing into the midst of the largest Japanese amphibious landing operation yet conceived by the imperial Japanese Navy. The Japanese were landing their first troops at Banten Bay near the northwest tip of Java.⁴

¹ The capital of Java is Jakarta. The city was called Batavia while under Dutch colonial rule.

² The forces in the Southwest Pacific area at the onset of war with Japan had been combined in a command called ABDACOM (American, British, Dutch, Australian Command).

³ Edwin P. Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*. (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976) 270

⁴ Banten Bay is also found spelled as Bantam Bay. Banten Bay reflects local usage.



Figure 2. Map of Sunda Strait and Banten Bay.

Image courtesy of the HMAS *Perth* Assn.

The nearly full moon lit the waters of the Java Sea as the two battle-scarred vessels left port. *Houston* could use only two of her three eight-inch triple-mount gun turrets. The aft turret, number three, had been destroyed in an earlier air attack on February 3, 1942.⁵ Both *Houston* and *Perth* had barely escaped the disastrous Battle of the Java Sea on February 27, avoiding the watery grave that claimed their Dutch counterparts the *Java* and *DeRuyter*. Weeks of constant action against the Japanese had left both vessels in desperate need of repairs. Inadequate port facilities in the Java area and a general lack of supplies contributed to the disheveled state of the ships on the evening of the 28th. The night before their departure Rooks and Waller had to beg the Dutch port authorities for fuel. The Dutch port master, citing orders to conserve the oil on hand for the now non-existent Dutch East Indies Fleet, gave the *Perth* only 300 tons and the *Houston* none at all.⁶ Sailing with half-full fuel tanks, both ships were ordered to make a final

⁵ Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 233

⁶ James D. Hornfischer. *Ship of Ghosts* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007) 98

desperate dash for the safety of Australia. The exhausted crews and their damaged ships headed into the straits at the economical speed of 22 knots.

At 11:15 PM Capt. Rooks spotted what he assumed to be a Dutch patrol craft. He ordered the proper code signal to be flashed and awaited the reply. Only after the unidentified vessel made an undecipherable reply did Rooks suspect he was sailing directly into the middle of a Japanese invasion fleet. In fact, the Allied cruisers had stumbled onto a Japanese cruiser division of three cruisers and nine destroyers assigned to cover the troop transports entering Banten Bay.⁷ The ensuing battle was as lopsided as it was swift. The Japanese fired eighty-seven torpedoes at their foe resulting in an unknown but fatal number of hits on the Allied ships. The large number of torpedoes in the water ran until they found a target and, unfortunately for the Japanese, their ships vastly outnumbered the Allied ships. As a result, the Japanese torpedoes sank at least four of their own invasion fleet, including the *Ryujo Maru*, headquarters ship of the Japanese commanding general, Hitoshi Imamura. The general was forced to abandon ship and spent several hours adrift in the bay. Hours after the invasion began, the wet and bedraggled general finally made it to the beach to accept congratulations from his staff officers for a successful mission.

At the Battle of Sunda Strait the Japanese Navy did more damage to their own invasion fleet than the battle weary Allied cruisers managed.⁸ The Japanese torpedoes, combined with heavy salvos of artillery fire, proved to be the death knell for the last of the ABDA fleet. Within three hours both the *Perth* and the *Houston* succumbed to numerous torpedo and gunnery strikes,

⁷ http://www.combinedfleet.com/battles/Java_Campaign (accessed 12-1-2011)

⁸ Hornfischer. *Ship of Ghosts*, 129

sinking before they cleared the strait they hoped would lead them to safety.⁹ The Battle of Sunda Strait signaled the end of the Allied defense in the Southwest Pacific, and dashed any hopes the Allied Chiefs of Staff might still have entertained about containing the Japanese advance in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya. In a mere two months the Japanese had swept aside the combined forces of the Americans, British, Dutch, and Australians along the entire length of the Malay Barrier, from Burma to New Guinea. The first effort at Allied coalition command in World War II had ended in abject failure.

The failure of America's initial World War II coalition cannot be attributed to a single misstep, or even to a series of missteps. Problems in planning, command, and logistics all combined to make the effort to contain the Japanese advance a hopeless one. For example, poor command organization did not by itself assure the ultimate loss of the Malay Barrier. On the other hand, the removal of one of the problems would not in all likelihood have changed the outcome in a significant manner. If the logistics problem could have been solved it is likely that defeat could have been deferred for a number of days, but without solutions to the command and planning problems, defeat was still the most plausible outcome. Rather than trying to determine which one factor contributed the most to the eventual defeat of ABDA, this essay will try to synthesize the effect of all of the problems that faced the coalition. It is certain that ABDACOM did fail to halt the Japanese advance in the South Pacific, and it is certain that the problems identified in this essay were the root causes of that failure. However, the experience of these coalition problems, and the attempts to solve those problems both in theater and elsewhere, provided the Allies with a foundation for later coalition actions.

⁹ Hoyt's *The Lonely Ships* and Hornfischer's *Ship of Ghosts* are two excellent accounts of the last sortie of those fine ships.

Though the ABDACOM coalition failed to achieve its stated goals, it laid the groundwork for further Allied coalition operations. From the highest staff level directives of the combined chiefs to the lower- echelon decisions concerning logistics and troop deployment, the story of ABDACOM provides a look at how countries hesitantly take steps toward working closely together, as one combined whole, to defeat a common enemy. Additionally, the history of ABDACOM provided planning officers a glimpse of the complexity of planning and implementing coalition operations giving insight into the difficulties that lay ahead.

Surprisingly, most of the operations in which the United States participated were coalition efforts. All of these benefited from the experiences of ABDACOM. If the campaign in the Southwest Pacific was the only event in World War II then ABDACOM might be considered a total failure. Only when considered in relation to later coalition actions that made up the whole war can any positives be extracted from the desperate holding actions that were the operational legacy of ABDACOM.

The negative outcome of ABDACOM's short official existence left a bitter legacy in the minds of the Allies and conspicuous silence on the part of historians who have written about the greatest conflict in the twentieth century. Spectacular failure is a difficult subject to include in books written about a glorious and victorious Allied war effort, though in some cases an author will focus on a particular failure to make a particular point for a particular audience. In the vast majority of general studies of World War II ABDA is given passing mention.

A focus on one aspect of the ABDACOM disaster is very much the case in B.H. Liddell Hart's 765-page *History of the Second World War* there is only one mention of ABDACOM. Liddell Hart's book is one of the outstanding general histories of World War II. In the sole paragraph Liddell Hart allots to ABDA he tangentially refers to it by mentioning General Sir

Archibald Wavell arriving to take command of “the new, emergency post of Supreme Commander, A.B.D.A. (American, British, Dutch, Australian) Command.”¹⁰ Liddell Hart then focuses on the British retreat down the Malay Peninsula. The loss of an entire Allied command is limited to the discussion of one decision made by General Wavell in relation to the defense of Singapore. Only a very general mention is made of any action in the rest of the theater. The entire life of the ABDACOM is distilled into one short paragraph:

Long before that, and even before the fall of Singapore, the Japanese tide of conquest was spreading through the Malay Archipelago. On January 11, Japanese forces landed in Borneo and Celebes, and stronger ones followed on the 24th. Five weeks later, on March 1, the Japanese launched an attack on Java, the core of the Dutch East Indies, after the island had been isolated by flanking moves. Within barely a week, the whole of Java had fallen into their hands like a ripe plum.¹¹

Liddell Hart’s treatment of ABDACOM is about standard for general histories written in the immediate post war years.

American historians’ general histories of the war offer little more in the way of analysis of ABDACOM. Gerhard Weinberg’s *A World at Arms* devotes more space to the events of early 1942 in the Southwest Pacific.¹² His brief description of the Japanese advance along the Malay Barrier has little of the obvious focus on national interests evident in Liddell Hart’s work, but Weinberg does manage to cover the entire sequence of events without one mention of ABDACOM. Unlike Liddell Hart, Weinberg focuses the importance of joint action in the theater. He also points out the primary problem with coalition commands when discussing the invasion of Borneo.

¹⁰ B.H.Liddell Hart. *History of the Second World War*. (New York: G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1970) 227

¹¹ Liddell Hart. *History of the Second World War*, 203

¹² Gerhard Weinberg is a naturalized German born American citizen.

On December 15 the Japanese began landing on the island of Borneo, important both for its location and its great oil resources. Divided between the British and the Dutch, the island could not be defended seriously by either as both had to concentrate what forces were available on other assignments: the British, the defense of Singapore; the Dutch, the protection of the island of Java.¹³

Weinberg correctly identifies the main objectives of the British and the Dutch in the Southwest Pacific Theater, namely holding onto their colonial possessions. However, what he does not make explicit is the effect that differing goals had on war planning both before U.S. intervention in the war and during the brief life of the coalition command in the Southwest Pacific.

John Keegan's *The Second World War* did a better job of covering the Japanese invasion of the East Indies, devoting three pages of his 607 to the campaign.¹⁴ John Keegan is most generous in the space he set aside for a general discussion of ABDACOM. He devoted two entire sub-chapters to a narrative of the Japanese invasions of the islands of the south Pacific, culminating in their seizure of Java and the fall of the Dutch government in the Netherlands East Indies. However, Keegan gives no analysis of the causes of ABDACOM's failure to hold the Malay Barrier. The limited nature of general single volume histories prevents them from devoting space to every operation in World War II.

Books directly focused on the early events of the war in the Pacific provide some deeper analysis of the difficulties involved in organizing, planning, and implementing coalition military action. Robert Smith Thompson's *Empires on the Pacific* and Ronald H. Spector's *Eagle Against the Sun* devote proportionally more text to the coverage of ABDACOM. Because these books are limited to the Pacific Theater of World War II they can go into more detail on the

¹³ Gerhard L. Weinberg. *A World At Arms*. (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 319

¹⁴ John Keegan. *The Second World War*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) pp. 261-263

subject than the general war histories mentioned above. Spector devotes a full, but short, chapter to the telling of the ABDACOM narrative with little mention of the root causes of coalition problems.¹⁵

A few books focus on particular units or ships that were intimately involved in the defense of the Malay Barrier and ABDACOM. An early and compelling treatment is John Toland's *But Not in Shame*. Published in 1961, Toland's book relied on extensive interviews with the surviving military leaders who led America's Pacific forces in the first six months after Pearl Harbor. He has put together an eminently readable story about the men who faced defeat in every battle until Midway. Toland covers the battles, invasions and fleet actions of the ABDACOM Theater quite well but sticks with narrative over analysis of the underlying problems that beset the Americans in their first coalition. Edwin Hoyt is equally informative in *The Lonely Ships*, a history of the U.S. Asiatic fleet. The first to face the Japanese juggernaut, the Asiatic fleet was repeatedly pushed south from China, to the Philippines, Java, and the Indian Ocean. Most of the fleet's obsolete and overage ships were lost to enemy action and Hoyt retells the stories of this hapless fleet, and the men who sailed in it, with dignity. Similarly, in *Ship of Ghosts*, James D. Hornfischer covers the history of the Asiatic fleet by focusing on its flagship the USS *Houston*, the last cruiser lost in the short sad history of ABDACOM. Both Hoyt and Hornfischer allude to coalition problems but fail to sufficiently analyze their impact on the losses of the ABDA coalition.

Two of the texts most directly related to the analysis of ABDACOM are command studies written by Major John R. Kennedy and Steven B Shepard from the Command and

¹⁵ Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the sun: the American war with Japan*. (New York: Free Press, 1985) 123-139

General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. The authors looked specifically at the deficiencies in command and control in the organization of ABDACOM. In *Command and Combined Operations: The Campaign for the Netherlands East Indies*, Major John R. Kennedy distills the focus of his monograph to two main points:

- 1) The commander should have the authority to direct actions necessary within his command to accomplish the mission.
- 2) The commander must ensure coordination among his subordinate commands to obtain unity of effort.¹⁶

Kennedy's work is clear, but limited to command issues. Logistics and planning must also be included in any attempt to understand the failures of the coalition. Only by looking at ABDACOM through a broader lens can a better understanding of the coalition's contribution to overall Allied strategy in the war be understood.

A study of the documents produced by ABDACOM during its short operational life would be extremely helpful. Unfortunately, the vast majority of original documents were lost when the Dutch surrendered Java in March 1942. Most primary sources relating to ABDACOM consist of either communications such as telegrams that were stored in multiple locations, or in memoirs written by the survivors of the command, usually some years after the fall of ABDACOM. In any event, the volume of primary material is not nearly as voluminous as that available for most World War II topics.

Despite the swift collapse of ABDACOM the United States and its Allies gained valuable insight into the difficult problems of organizing and maintaining a coalition. The failure of ABDACOM exposed key political and military issues that needed to be resolved in order to form

¹⁶ Major John R. Kennedy. *Command in Joint and Combined Operations: The Campaign for the Netherlands East Indies*. (Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies, 1990) i

successful coalitions. Politically the Allies had to put aside purely national concerns and make compromises to assure that every nation was willing to commit men and material to the fight. The United States in particular had to overcome domestic opposition to entering World War II. Public perception of the United States fighting for the maintenance of European empires in the Far East and elsewhere forced President Roosevelt had to tread lightly when making military decisions during his third presidential campaign in 1940.¹⁷ Political compromise started even before the United States was directly involved in combat, through the Neutrality Acts and the development of Lend/Lease programs. A coalition can only be effective if the leadership of each nation is willing to compromise some if not all of their national objectives to achieve a larger victory. FDR had to figure out how to create an environment where the public and the military leadership would tolerate those compromises. American political and military issues related to creating, planning and operating a coalition are discussed in Chapter 1.

The literature on later American wartime coalitions details the conditions that tipped the scale towards Allied victory. Most texts focus on the command and control requirements needed to meld two or more nations' forces with different training routines, equipment requirements, and different tactical doctrines into a unified fighting force.¹⁸ The importance of creating a unified command is highlighted in the study of different coalition actions in World War II. Several texts have argued that in the first coalition action in World War II the American, British, Dutch, Australian Command was unduly hampered by the unclear command latitude given to

¹⁷ Grace Person Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II*. (Annapolis: Naval institute Press, 1953) 9

¹⁸ Anthony Rice. "Command and Control: The Essence of Coalition Warfare," *Parameters*, (Spring 1997), 154

British General Archibald Wavell, the overall commander of ABDACOM.¹⁹ Maj. Kennedy's *Command in Joint and Combined Operations* clearly states the military opinion of the requirements for coalition command to be effective: "The combined commander must have the authority to direct actions necessary within his command to accomplish the mission in order to be successful."²⁰ The question of command and control of the ABDA coalition is addressed in Chapter 2 of this essay.

Chapter 2 also looks at how local commanders were forced to create coalition doctrine on the spot in the Southwest Pacific Theater. The concept of coalition action was discussed at the early Combined Chiefs of Staff meetings in Washington D.C., but actual organization and operations had to be developed and implemented at the theater level. Since the war in the Pacific was primarily a naval war, most of the case studies from the short life of ABDACOM are related to naval actions. This does not lessen the importance of the ground and air battles that took place, but the focus on naval action serves to show the overall conditions in the Southwest Pacific Theater in 1942.

Likewise, ABDACOM was a vast command encompassing the largest theater area in the Pacific. This essay will focus on events that occurred on the Malay Barrier, specifically Java and neighboring islands. Though the Philippines and Burma were both included in the original area controlled by ABDACOM, the command was so short lived that it had no real effect on the battles in those areas. The fact that General Douglas MacArthur was actually a subordinate commander in the ABDACOM chain of command is nothing more than an unusual footnote in

¹⁹ See Steven B. Shepard, *American, British, Dutch, and Australian Coalition: Unsuccessful Band of Brothers*, (Masters thesis, Fort Leavenworth, Ks., 2003) and Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare*, (Center for Military History, Washington D.C., 1980)

²⁰ Kennedy. *Command in Joint and Combined Operations*, 41

the history of the war. ABDACOM's short and sad history is inextricably tied to the Malay Barrier.

Logistics played an important role in the failure of ABDACOM. Chapter 3 looks at how distance, lack of suitable bases, and poor organization in the theater affected material distribution and maintenance. ABDACOM did not have access to developed supply and refitting bases. Lack of these developed bases meant increased pressure on front line troops who commonly faced shortages of everything from rations to ammunition.

The primary question this paper addresses is how a coalition develops under adverse political and military pressure, especially when faced with a rapidly deteriorating strategic position. By examining how ABDACOM came into being at the theater level this study will show that coalitions are subject to specific problems of command, organization and supply that differ from those faced by nations engaged in unilateral military operations. These problems must all be solved to give any coalition hope of victory. Finding solutions to only one or two of the problems inherent in coalition warfare might extend the life of the coalition, but each member nation should ideally be searching for solutions to all of the problems so as to give the coalition the best possible chance of success.

CHAPTER 1 - Policy and Strategy in the Pacific

Western Pacific Geopolitical Landscape

The Pacific Ocean is the largest body of water in the world. In the mid-twentieth century the United States was just one of several nations that claimed political and strategic interests in the region, based on its control of the Philippine Islands, Guam, Wake Island and Hawaii. Japan, China, Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France all had either national or colonial interests that were geographically dependent on control of the sea lanes and lines of communication that crossed this immense ocean. The ability to maintain colonies in the area depended on the ability to keep regular supply and communication channels open. The political and strategic motivations of the nations competing for economic primacy in the Pacific had a direct impact on U.S. war planning during the interwar years of the early twentieth century. Japanese actions in China led to economic restrictions imposed by nations supporting the “Open Door” policy. This, in turn, led to Japanese plans to take the resources that were denied them by the European powers and the United States. The numerous competing interests in the Pacific created the international tensions that led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and subsequent U.S. involvement in World War II.

The nations with interests in the Pacific produced war plans designed to assure their security. These plans often looked to be designed as staff exercises aimed at giving a general overview of the numbers of men and quantities of material required to fight a primarily naval war. During the 1920s and 1930s these plans were used by the Army and the Navy to give

officers experience in planning operations at the theater level. Prior to the late 1930s none of the plans created by military staffs seriously entertained the possibility of coalition action. Japan had historically fought alone and had no experience with coalition building. However, the Japanese did become a party to several treaties, known by the collective term Washington Treaty System, which were designed to limit national expenditures on naval expansion and to create military stability in the Pacific through limitation of total naval tonnage and Pacific area military base fortification.²¹

In the 1920s Japan was most closely aligned with Britain, though with the collapse of the Washington Treaty System and the Japanese government's move toward unilateral action and international isolationism, the nation began to withdraw from international treaty commitments. The Washington Treaty System began to collapse in the late 1920's with a resurgence of Chinese nationalism that threatened Japanese interests in Manchuria. In the 1930's global depression cause many of the affected nations to develop strongly protectionist tariff rules. This combination of events caused the Japanese government to rethink participation in the treaty system and by 1936 Japan had withdrawn from all of the Washington Treaties and the League of Nations.²² By the 1930s Japan was working to assure independent access to the resources needed to maintain its burgeoning empire.²³

Of the nations competing for strategic advantage in the Pacific, Japan was in the best position to carve an empire out of the weaker nation states and colonies surrounding the Japanese home islands. A geographically small nation, composed of a series of islands separated from

²¹ Akira Iriye. *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*. (New York: Longman, 1987) 2

²² Alice Wyman Miller. *Becoming Asia: Change and Continuity in Asian International Relations since World War II*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011) 16

²³ Miller. *Becoming Asia*, 16

China by the Sea of Japan, Japan had limited natural resources and a relatively large population. The government had engaged in rapid imperialist expansion in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. Victory in wars against China in 1895 and Russia in 1905 gave the Japanese full control of new colonies in Taiwan and Korea, while at the same time pushing the Western Powers farther from the geographic center of Japanese power. These territorial gains gave Japan access to the resources, mainly coal and mineral deposits, available in Korea and Manchuria. However, the Japanese Empire still lacked access to sufficient sources of oil and rubber, two resources vital to the modernizing economies of the twentieth century. To acquire oil and Japan relied on international trade, primarily with the United States and European colonial powers, such as the Dutch. The United States was the world's foremost producer of steel and sold Japan large quantities of scrap iron and steel. The Dutch, with their colony in the Netherlands East Indies controlled access to most of the oil reserves in the Southwest Pacific. The military victories over China and Russia proved that Japan had become a powerful player in the international political arena. Other great powers of the era, such as Great Britain and the United States, began to look at the expanding Japanese empire as a threat to be taken seriously.²⁴

The Japanese government was divided on how best to achieve resource self-reliance and create an empire immune to political pressure from the outside. In the 1920s, Japan's participation in the Washington Treaty System legitimized the country as a great power by forcing the United States and the United Kingdom to accept the Japanese Navy was one of the three most powerful navies in the world.²⁵ At the same time the treaty limited the power

²⁴ Edward S. Miller. *War Plan Orange*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991) 27-28

²⁵ Akira Iriye. *The Origins of the Second World War*. 2

projection capability of the Imperial Japanese Navy to a defensive area in the western Pacific by limiting the number and tonnage of capital ships each navy was allowed. The formula used was known as the 5-5-3 system: Japan was allowed capital ship tonnage, in a ratio of three tons for every five of the United States and Britain.²⁶ In Article IV of the Washington Naval treaty the total tonnage was clearly spelled out. “The total standard replacement tonnage of each of the contracting powers shall not exceed in standard displacement, for the United States 525,000 tons (533,400 metric tons); for the British Empire 525,000 tons...for Japan 315,000 tons (320,040 metric tons).”²⁷ These limits grated at Japanese pride as well as limiting their fleets’ ability to project power across the entire Pacific Basin.

The naval limitation treaty was signed in Washington D.C. before the onset of the global depression of 1929. Internal political divisions triggered by this depression caused Japan to retreat from a policy of integrating its economy with the emerging world trade system and led to increasingly isolationist action to build and maintain a self-sufficient empire. Economic depression combined with the belief held by many Japanese that the Washington Treaty System was inherently unfair led Japan to choose a unilateral path toward imperial glory. In the 1920s and 1930s Japan began to retreat from its international treaty commitments and to forego international approval when making foreign policy decisions. Pro-expansionist forces in the Japanese military felt that the limitations of the treaties hindered the growth of empire.²⁸

Japan’s most aggressive expansionist actions involved invasions of China in the 1931 and 1937. Japan’s fear that growing Chinese nationalism would interfere with existing economic and

²⁶ Robert Smith Thompson. *Empires on the Pacific*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 37

²⁷ John T. Kuehn. *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008) 184

²⁸ Herbert Bix. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. (New York: Perennial, 2000) 177, 269

political interests on the mainland was the driving force behind these invasions. Japan's move towards unilateral action in the Pacific and its invasions of China, long considered an open nation by the European powers, made the other nations striving to maintain their economic interests in the area very nervous. It was only after the other great powers with interests in the area began to threaten Japan with economic sanction that the colonies held by the Dutch, British, and Americans were targeted by the Imperial government for further Japanese expansion. Japan had chosen an isolationist, expansionist path to achieve its imperialist and economic objectives. This choice put them on a collision course with the other powers in the Pacific.²⁹

In the 1930s the Western Powers began preparing defensive plans in case war broke out with Japan. The Netherlands was particularly concerned about Japanese intentions due to the proximity of its colonial holdings to the Japanese Empire and the fact that the Netherlands East Indies, in addition supplying the Dutch with historically important products such as spices and kapok, was the best source of crude oil and natural rubber in the region.³⁰

The Netherlands East Indies encompassed all or parts of the islands of Java, Borneo, Celebes, Sumatra, and New Guinea in addition to hundreds of smaller islands in the surrounding seas. The East Indies were first called the spice islands by European explorers and the Dutch first ventured there in 1595 in a bid to gain direct access to black pepper and other spices. Early voyages were so profitable that the Dutch government chartered a private company to control trade. In 1800 it began directly administering the East Indies as a colony. The Dutch were thus firmly involved in the affairs of the East Indies for over 300 years prior to the outbreak of World War II. This area was of vital importance to the Dutch because of the large rubber plantations

²⁹ Bix, *Hirohito*, 375-376

³⁰ Tom Womack, *The Dutch Naval Air Force Against Japan: The Defense of the Netherlands East Indies, 1941-1942*. (London: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006) 1-2

and extensive oil reserves. The oil found on Borneo in particular was considered of high enough quality to require the bare minimum of refining before it could be used. The purity of the crude oil produced in the Netherlands East Indies was useful in an area of the world still awaiting the benefits of first world industrialization. To the Japanese, control of the Balikpapan oil fields on Borneo would help secure oil independence. The Netherlands government-in-exile was keen to maintain control of the resources in the Netherlands East Indies as a vital source of material to trade for weapons with the United States and to prevent the Japanese from using the oil to strengthen its hold on the Southwest Pacific.³¹

Great Britain had its own concerns in the Pacific. Britain controlled major colonies in Burma and Malaya, as well as India. They also controlled the cities of Hong Kong and Singapore both of which were considered jewels of their empire in the Far East. The British were fully occupied in checking German aggression in Europe in the late 1930s and were having difficulty maintaining their vast and far-flung empire. Losing any of their Far East holdings to the Japanese was considered unthinkable. Unlike the Dutch, who relied on their colony for the resources that they hoped would be useful in helping to build their forces by trading with the U.S., and would be beneficial for and Allied push to contain the Japanese, the British interest was as much political as it was economic. The retention of the empire was intrinsic to the pride of the British people. A possible defeat at the hands of the Japanese was an embarrassment that the Britons did not want to contemplate. They would therefore fight desperately to hold onto

³¹ Womack. *The Dutch Naval Air Force Against Japan*, 1

their colonies in the Pacific. The United Kingdom had the will to fight, but the ability to hold the colonies was in question in 1940.³²

Australia had interests in the Pacific that dovetailed with those of the United Kingdom. As part of the British Empire, Australia relied on the British to secure resources not available domestically. The country lay to the south of the Malay Barrier and was the Allied nation closest to the Japanese Empire's southern border. Australia's location also meant that it was at the end of a very long supply line when getting material from either the United Kingdom or the United States. Another problem facing the Australians was that as part of the British Empire a significant portion of their military strength was committed to supporting the British elsewhere. By 1940 Australian troops were fighting with the British in North Africa and, as war with Japan became more than a distant possibility, Australian prime minister John Curtin became more concerned with securing sufficient troops to defend the country's borders. Australia faced a rapidly expanding Japanese Empire and had little hope of securing either troops or British aid in sufficient quantity to long forestall any Japanese invasion. Australians feared their nation was in real danger in the event of open war.³³

The United States was a late entrant in the political gamesmanship that highlighted international relations in the Pacific from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s. It was an American flotilla's visit to Edo that spurred Japan to end its long isolation from global geopolitics in 1853. Since its founding, the United States traditionally distanced itself from

³² John Connell. *Wavell: Supreme Commander*. (London: Collins, 1969) 102-103; Nicholas Tarling. *A Sudden Rampage: the Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, 1941-1945*. (London: Hurst & Company, 2001) 30-33

³³ G. St. J. Barclay. "Australia looks to America." *Pacific Historical Review*. 261 Barclay's article is a good look at the views of the Australian government and military in the years leading to U.S. involvement in World War II.

European problems and maintained a national myth of isolationism in political and military issues.³⁴ However, the U.S. did see the need for expansion in the Pacific to maintain economic parity with other industrializing nations. Keeping up with the economic growth of Europe was not the same as developing “foreign entanglements,” at least in the minds of the American populace. Hawaii was annexed in 1898, in part to provide a port and coaling station for ships crossing the Pacific for the China trade. Hawaiian annexation, coupled with the acquisition of the Philippine Islands and Guam after the Spanish-American War in 1898, gave the United States a substantial interest in maintaining its newly-acquired Pacific possessions as a way to expand trade in Asia. Domestic arguments between isolationists and expansionists about how to define American control of the Philippines were fierce. Domestic controversy about expansion did not prevent the United States from developing a string of bases across the Pacific. The advantage of having naval bases near U.S. trading partners in the Far East was key to keeping control of Pacific territories for the first half of the twentieth century.³⁵

Four powers maintained economic and political interest in the western Pacific after World War I. Of those four Great Britain had global commitments that prevented them from focusing the bulk of their power on containing Japanese ambition in Asia. Holland was considered a minor power in relation to Britain, the United States and Japan. The United States faced the possibility of a two-hemisphere war that would divide its forces between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Japan had the entirety of its military power at its disposal and initially used the army and navy to good effect when expanding its empire. Japan’s numerical advantage in the

³⁴ Walter LaFeber. *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad, Volume 2 – Since 1896*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994) 394-395

³⁵ Michael Hunt. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 138-139.

Pacific would force its enemies to rethink their war plans to have any hope of containing the Japanese.

American War Plans: Plan Orange

The United States military began formulating war plans against Japan long before the outbreak of hostilities in 1941. The approach to war planning adopted by the military staff mirrored the public's popular assumptions that the United States maintained a tradition of non-interference in foreign matters unless attacked first. In other words, the plans consisted of scenarios where the enemy was the aggressor and America was initially on the defensive. Historically the United States was often willing to act preemptively to secure economic advantage, as in the case of the support for revolution to separate Panama from Colombia for the sole purpose of securing the rights to the Panama Canal Zone.³⁶ The public however believed fervently in the myth that the United States was above the rampant infighting that was common in Europe. Diplomatic dollar diplomacy and the Monroe doctrine seemed to be an effective tool for maintaining the international status quo and keeping the European Powers from interfering with American interests in the Western Hemisphere. This gave military leaders the luxury to plan for wars based on the assumption of foreign aggression against a peaceful United States.³⁷

Most of the planning that occurred in the 1920s was of such limited scope as to be considered mere staff exercises by some analysts. The United States created a series of plans that were predicated on various scenarios for future war. These plans were color-coded with a

³⁶ Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 131-132

³⁷ LaFeber. *The American Age*, 349-353

different color assigned to each potential enemy. Fourteen different color plans covered a range of possible enemies from England (red) to Mexico (green).³⁸

War Plan Orange was the designation that assumed a war with Japan. The Joint Army and Navy Board created the first “Plan Orange” designed to defeat the Japanese Empire in 1907. The United States was aware of Japanese territorial ambitions in Asia and accordingly planned to protect its own interests. As early as the 1890s, the U.S. military believed Japan would be the most likely opponent in any future Pacific war: a view influenced by the Japanese victory over Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) reinforced the U.S. view that Japan was the most dangerous potential enemy in the Pacific. The expanding Japanese empire would have to come at the expense of one or more of the powers that already maintained interests in the region. Since the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands all had significant interests in the Pacific attention needed to be paid to the overall situation in areas of overlapping interest, in addition to the face-to-face war with Japan envisioned by Plan Orange. The U.S. plan might have been unilateral, but American planners were aware that Britain and the Netherlands would fiercely protect their Far Eastern possessions. As the 1930s progressed, and Japan engaged in open war in Manchuria and China, American military planners took the Japanese threat more seriously.³⁹

Plan Orange, in its various incarnations, assumed a war between the United States and Japan fought with no outside help on either side. The U.S. planners further assumed that Japan would take the Philippine Islands and surrounding island groups at the onset of hostilities. Early Japanese success would force the United States to fight a primarily naval war, hopping from

³⁸ Steven T. Ross. *American War Plans 1941-1945*. (London, Frank Cass, 1997) 1-2

³⁹ Miller, *War Plan Orange*, 1-3

island to island until reaching and liberating the lost territories in the Southwest Pacific. A Plan Orange war would therefore involve initial Japanese success and the American loss of the Philippines and possibly Guam and Wake, followed by a U.S. Navy counterattack through the central Pacific to retake lost ground and push the Japanese back to their home islands.⁴⁰

This scenario meant that the Navy had to plan for two distinct types of action: first, the defeat of the Japanese Navy, and second, the transport of reinforcements to retake U.S. installations lost in the opening stages of the war. Plan Orange rightly assumed that such a war would be very difficult to support due to the distances that U.S. forces would have to cover to attack the enemy and to defend and support advance bases when they were made operational. Plan Orange was regularly updated from 1907 until the late 1930s. The evolution of Plan Orange took into account changes in technology, primarily aircraft, and shifts in naval strength on both sides due to treaty obligations. The Joint Board revised Plan Orange every time evolving military and political conditions changed the balance of power in the Pacific, and although the revisions were numerous, the basic concepts of Plan Orange stayed the same.⁴¹

Another assumption of all of early Plan Orange variants was that the defense of the Southwest Pacific was left entirely to the British and the Dutch. American planners did not envision sending major fleet units or troops to any western Pacific base other than those maintained by the United States in the Philippines and other U.S.-controlled atolls such as Wake Island. As late as the summer of 1941, U.S. planners still worked under the assumption that

⁴⁰ Miller. *War Plan Orange*, 177, 272

⁴¹ Miller. *War Plan Orange*, 2-6, 35

American forces would not be committed to any area outside of those which were already under direct U.S. control, such as the Philippines.⁴²

In 1939, with the specter of American involvement in the war growing ever larger, planners began to work with the other nations who had interests opposed to Japan in the Pacific. Only after the rest of the Pacific powers were well involved in their own wars did the United States seriously consider the possibility of coalition action. Japan was bogged down in the invasion of China. By April 1940 Britain was desperately trying to survive the onslaught of Hitler in Europe. Holland was invaded in May of the same year. America was still technically a neutral country in world affairs, but weapons sales and the tradition of capitalism and democracy pushed the United States toward support of the Allied nations. This was the scenario facing American planners in 1940 and 1941.

American War Plans: Plan Dog

One of the first military planners to put concrete ideas about the possibility of coalition action in the Pacific on paper was Admiral Harold Rainsford Stark. As U.S. Chief of Naval Operations from 1939 until 1942, Stark oversaw U.S. naval preparations leading up to America's entry into the war. In November 1940, Admiral Stark wrote a memorandum to Frank Knox, the new Secretary of the Navy. Known as the Plan Dog Memo, this message was influential in the development of the "Germany First" strategy the United States and the United Kingdom adopted in 1941. The memorandum is known as the Plan Dog Memo due to the alphabetic designator of the most likely war scenario according to the Department of the Navy.

⁴² Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition War 1941-1942* (Washington D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953), 75-78

The Plan Dog Memo laid out the potential circumstances for American participation in the war as envisioned by Stark. The document provides an early look at American planners' assumptions for fighting Japan and Germany. Option D was the plan to go on the offensive in Europe while maintaining a defensive position in the Pacific. The basis for this strategy was the belief that if Britain survived and Germany was defeated, overwhelming the remaining Axis powers would be simply a matter of time.⁴³ Admiral Stark showed a clear understanding of the geopolitical realities facing President Roosevelt in 1940. He crafted a paper that addressed both the military realities of a nation with limited available resources but a large untapped production capacity and the political limitations that Roosevelt faced in his dealings with Congress and the American people.

Stark did more than set the general direction of American strategy with the Plan Dog Memo. The memorandum showed that at least some of the men involved in war planning were finally considering the more specific aspects of strategy that involved military action in concert with one or more allied nations. From the start, the memo makes clear that the survival of Britain was key to shaping the U.S. response to aggression from either Japan or the Axis nations in Europe. Stark argued that if Britain fell “we might not lose everywhere, but we might, possibly, not win anywhere.”⁴⁴ Based on his judgment of the necessity of keeping Britain in the fight, Stark then laid out five different war plan options. These ranged from limited war with Japan only and no allied assistance to remaining entirely out of the war and pulling back to Western Hemisphere defense. Option D, the one adopted by the Joint Planning Board,

⁴³ Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library. Safe Files. Box 4. Navy Department “Plan Dog” index folder. Admiral Harold Stark. Plan Dog Memo. P.1 (digital archives. Accessed 12-26-11) This memorandum can be accessed in full on the digital archive.

⁴⁴ Stark Memo. 1 (emphasis in original document)

recognized that the Axis countries must be defeated in succession, while trying to assure that friendly powers maintain as much military and economic strength as possible. Admiral Stark stated that he “endeavored to keep in view the political realities in our own country.”⁴⁵ He assumed that war with the Axis would involve some form of coalition action with at least Britain and in all likelihood other allied nations even, though the American public still supported non-intervention in 1940.

Admiral Stark went on to assess the national objectives of the United States. America’s political, economic and ideological objectives were to maintain the status quo on U.S. possessions in the Western Hemisphere. Stark pointed out that this implied “the diminution of the offensive military power of Japan, with a view to the retention of our economic and political interests in the Far East.”⁴⁶ Despite the Germany First strategy that American planners adopted, they never forgot about the maintenance of U.S. interests in the Pacific. Though containment of Japan was secondary to the defeat of Germany, the United States was determined to maintain as much military strength in the Pacific as possible. The question then became one of determining where in the Pacific that American military strength would be most useful.

Plan Orange called for a move through the central Pacific to the Philippines. However, Plan Orange did not include the possibility of coalition action and therefore did not assume any U.S. action in those areas of the Pacific controlled by the British or the Dutch. Since overall American strategy after 1940 assumed an alliance with Britain, it was necessary to alter Plan Orange to include planning for coalition action in the Pacific. The Plan Dog Memo and its

⁴⁵ Stark Memo. 1

⁴⁶ Stark Memo. 2

author, Admiral Stark, were instrumental in getting the U.S. Joint Planning Board to look into revising Plan Orange based on the changing political situation in the Pacific and in Europe.

Stark's memorandum presented the Secretary of the Navy with an excellent, though in hindsight flawed, analysis of what working with the British and the Dutch in the Pacific would entail. Stark's initial analysis pointed out that the United Kingdom was committed to defensive positions in Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the South Pacific. India was also in a precarious position, vulnerable to attack if the Japanese deemed it necessary to push the British out of their crown jewel and extend the Japanese security perimeter. Admiral Stark considered it unlikely that Japan wanted to deal with India while mired in their China adventure.⁴⁷ He also understood that it was not only likely that the United States would work with Britain and the Netherlands but that such a coalition would be useful for the implementation of his stated American objectives in the Pacific. Stark stated,

We should, therefore, examine other plans which involve a war having a more limited objective than the complete defeat of Japan, and in which we would undertake hostilities *only in cooperation with the British and Dutch*, and in which these undertake to provide an effective and continued resistance in Malaysia.⁴⁸

Thus, it is clear that as early as November 1940, high ranking U.S. officers recognized that coalition action in the Southwest Pacific was not only likely, but might be the best plan of action to contain the expansionist Japanese.

The Plan Dog Memo also showed that Admiral Stark clearly understood that members of any coalition would have differing or conflicting national objectives. He understood Australia's concerns about a Japanese invasion and Britain's fear that it could lose significant parts of its Far

⁴⁷ Stark Memo. 3

⁴⁸ Stark Memo. 6 (italics added)

East Empire, and was also worried about the fortitude and stability of the Dutch in the East Indies. It is a bit ironic that shortly after clearly stating the American objectives he dismissed Dutch objectives in their colony. Stark wrote “These Dutchmen will act in what they believe is their own selfish best interests.”⁴⁹ Despite any doubts Stark may have had about the motivations and fighting abilities of the Dutch and the British, he did encourage the concept of coalition war with them. He believed neither country could stand without assistance. Admiral Stark assumed that the U.S. Asiatic fleet would be drafted to help in the Southwest Pacific. He wrote, “In addition to our Asiatic Fleet, I am convinced that they would need further [reinforcement] by ships and aircraft drawn from our fleet in Hawaii, and possibly even by troops.”⁵⁰ The message was clear: even if the United States adopted the Germany First strategy, military strength might be needed to contain the Japanese and to help preserve both the objectives of the United States and the Pacific holdings of the British and Dutch. Admiral Stark knew that any major commitment to the Allied cause would require a larger naval presence in the Pacific than the United States was capable of maintaining in 1940.

The memorandum also revealed Stark’s belief that the root cause of the problems in the Pacific was intrinsically economic in nature. Protection of Allied territories in the Pacific boiled down to maintenance of resource control. Stark also understood the importance of national prestige as a driving force of wartime strategy, and warned that unexpected events might force the president to engage in a total war based on public pressure. The United States was interested in moral and economic containment of the Japanese. He wrote that the “economic effect of a

⁴⁹ Stark Memo. 3

⁵⁰ Stark Memo. 7

complete Japanese hegemony in that region is conjectural. But regardless of economic considerations, we have heretofore strongly opposed the further expansion of Japan.”⁵¹

In 1940, American war planners finally accepted the possibility of coalition action in the Pacific. Plan Dog spurred a renewed flurry of war planning in Washington, D.C. 1941 brought more meetings between the United States and Britain to try and create a unified plan for operations should the United States become an active member of the Allies.

American War Plans: ABC-1 and Rainbow 5

The first planning conference in which the United States began to work more closely with the British on developing a common grand strategy was held from late January to late March 1941. Called ABC-1, this secret conference held in Washington, D.C., was attended by members of the military general staffs of America and Britain.⁵² The report generated by this meeting clarified that the Allied grand strategy would indeed be the Germany First strategy. Ranking officers at the meetings agreed that Germany was the most dangerous of the Axis enemies. If the United Kingdom fell to the Germans, then the United States would have limited options for operations in Europe. The necessity of preventing the collapse of Great Britain was one of the driving ideas behind the decision to adopt the Germany First strategy.

One area of strategy in which the United States and the United Kingdom disagreed was the importance of holding the British possession of Singapore in the Far East. The American planners interpreted the British insistence on a strong defense of Singapore as a political move

⁵¹ Stark Memo. 8

⁵² The meetings had to remain secret due to the fact the U.S. was not formally at war with any of the axis powers. It is obvious, though, that the political leadership of the U.S. was already leaning towards support of the allies. These secret meetings allowed the U.S. and British planning staffs to outline and determine important grand strategy concepts before the U.S. officially entered the war.

designed to help Britain retain its colonial possessions in the Far East after the war was over. The American government was willing to fight global fascism, but it could not be seen as helping the British maintain their global empire.⁵³ The American public would not support such acts until December 1941. Though Roosevelt supported the goals of the secret talks that resulted in the ABC-1 document he could not explicitly support the document. The official history of the Joint Chiefs of Staff assessed the political problems facing Roosevelt in 1941 as follows,

It is highly probable that he was in fact reluctant to give official sanction to a plan drawn on the supposition that the United States was going to be forced to fight, for large sections of the American public were stoutly opposed to any action that could be possibly interpreted as likely to embroil the nation in a “foreign war” and were not sufficiently informed in the late spring of 1941 to realize that war was probably inevitable.⁵⁴

It would take the shock of Pearl Harbor to change the minds of the American public and generate support for open war against the Axis. Prior to this attack the United States had to take into account the public’s resistance to any involvement that would be seen as directly aiding the maintenance of the British Empire. In the opinion of a majority of Americans, the United States had no duty to keep other empires intact, but only the obligation to maintain American economic and territorial integrity in the face of global challenges.⁵⁵

The Germany First strategy envisioned by ABC-1 caused the United States to reassess Plan Orange and to develop a new series of military options for the Pacific. The resulting set of papers was called the Rainbow War Plan, which consisted of a series of scenarios each with a tailored military reaction. The one that was ultimately adopted by the United States in 1941,

⁵³ Matloff and Snell, *Strategic Planning*, 36-38. The U.S. explained that diversion of American military resources to maintain a British Far East empire would be beyond the scope of American involvement in the War and reminded the British to focus on the Germany first strategy instead of worrying about the potential loss of parts of their empire.

⁵⁴ Hayes, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 9

⁵⁵ Ross, *American War Plans*, 7

Rainbow 5, envisioned holding the Japanese behind the Malay Barrier. Large parts of the ABC-1 document were used verbatim in the Rainbow plan. The primary difference between the two was that ABC-1 was an unofficial finding reached by two not yet allied governments and Rainbow was a national plan that was the official opinion of the United States military establishment.⁵⁶

Both ABC-1 and Rainbow 5 contemplated coalition action in the event that the United States was drawn into the war. However, neither plan documented a specific system for integrating different national forces. These plans were simply the template for more precise coalition planning in the event that America ended up fighting in one of the preplanned scenarios mapped out by the Joint Planning Board.

Under the general guidelines laid out in the Rainbow Plan, offensive action in the Pacific was deferred until the defeat of Germany and Italy allowed for the transfer of men and material from the Atlantic theater. The United States, Britain and their allies were to hold the Malay Barrier with the limited forces available in the Philippines, Singapore, and the South Pacific. In both ABC-1 and Rainbow 5 reinforcements were designated for supporting operations in Europe, not the Far East.⁵⁷ Both plans assumed the loss of the Philippines and that the U.S. Navy would have to push west from Hawaii. The situation in the Pacific also meant that the United States would postpone any serious attempt to take pressure off of its interests in the Far East. Rainbow 5 was the United States' war plan in effect on December 7, 1941. America's strategy in World War II would evolve from the ideas contained Rainbow 5.

⁵⁶ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 12

⁵⁷ Matloff and Snell. *Strategic Planning*, 44-45

After Pearl Harbor forced the United States into the war, a new planning conference code named Arcadia was held. This time President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill held direct strategy discussions. The Allied leaders had plenty to think about as they prepared for their meeting. The world's two most powerful democracies were now committed to fighting against the Axis, which, in 1941, seemed unstoppable. The British had been driven from the continent of Europe and were confined to their home islands and threatened African possessions. Their other European allies had been knocked out of the war and they were facing severe pressure from the Axis on their colonial holdings in North Africa and the South Pacific. The United States, meanwhile, had suffered a humiliating defeat in Hawaii and was not fully prepared to fight a multi-front war. Other Allied nations, such as the Soviet Union and China appeared to be on the brink of collapse, though both were managing to stave off final defeat. Victories were few and defeats were many in December 1941. Arcadia, the first conference held after the U.S. declaration of war, would be crucial to building a coalition capable of defeating the Axis.⁵⁸

The Arcadia meetings were held in Washington, D.C., from December 22, 1941 to January 14, 1942. This was the first face-to-face meeting between the leaders of the two major Allied countries since the entry of the United States into World War II. These meetings confirmed the Allied strategy of a Germany First policy. The British also used this chance to discuss coalition operations in North Africa and South Asia. The civilian leaders remained focused on the Europe first strategy but did sketch plans for some secondary theaters, including the Southwest Pacific.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 49-50

⁵⁹ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 250-252

The Arcadia conference also resulted in the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The U.S. delegation was impressed with the way in which the British Chiefs of Staff were organized. The British system of using one staff to control the entire military organization differed from the system in use in the United States in 1941. The Americans had separate staffs for the Army and the Navy, which did not work closely with one another except on the Joint Planning Board. The independence of the two military branches caused much duplication of effort and created tension between the services. The Americans at the Arcadia conference saw a way to end the inter-service conflict by adopting the British system of chiefs of staff. The conference attendees went even further by creating a Combined Chiefs of Staff consisting of the British Chiefs of Staff and the newly formed American Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁶⁰

Prior to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States was already preparing its forces for the coming conflict. The Army and Navy were both rapidly expanding personnel numbers and seeking to procure the arms and material needed to fight at least one major theater action. American factories were producing arms and supplying Britain, Russia, and China with much needed materiel. All of this was being accomplished even though the majority of Americans were against getting involved in yet another “foreign entanglement.” America was preparing for war, but on December 7, the United States still needed more time.⁶¹

Pre-war planning generated a general strategic plan that the United States followed in World War II. This strategy did not envision coalition action until shortly before U.S. involvement in the war. While America prepared for war and became the primary supplier of war material for Britain and other anti-Axis nations, many military leaders realized that coalition

⁶⁰ Hayes, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 48-49; Spector. *Eagle against the Sun*, 125

⁶¹ Hayes, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 23

actions would be the rule rather than the exception for the Allies in World War II. By the time the Allies produced ABC-1 coalition warfare was seen as inevitable. Nevertheless, due to domestic resistance in the United States, little was done to set up specific organizational systems until after the United States declared war on Japan. Acknowledging that coalition warfare was imminent was different from having in place a system to deal with the command and control issues that often form the stumbling blocks of coalition warfare. The U.S. had the basic strategy for fighting coalition actions in place, but it would fall to the Allied commanders in the Pacific to merge American, British, Dutch and Australian troops into a unified and effective military force for the first of the Allied coalition efforts in World War II. The Arcadia meeting laid the foundation for the initial ABDA organization and gave local commanders a framework for planning the defense of the Malay Barrier.⁶²

⁶² Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 59-60

CHAPTER 2 - Coalition

The Birth of ABDACOM

The Arcadia conference in December 1941 heralded the true beginning of the ABDACOM coalition. It was at this conference that the United States and Britain formally approved the formation of a coalition whose express purpose was the defense of the Malay Barrier and the containment of Japanese expansion in the Pacific. The delegations, led by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, met in Washington, D.C. for the first wartime conference held between the top ranking military staffs of both nations. General George Marshall was the ranking U.S. officer. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Stark, Army Air Forces Commander General Henry “Hap” Arnold, and Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet Admiral Ernest King were also present. These four officers were responsible for formulating and presenting U.S. views to the British at the Arcadia meetings.

At Arcadia, the first decision was related to command and reinforcement. The British insisted that the question of reinforcement be settled before any other questions were answered. The United States’ negotiators, Chief of Staff Marshall in particular, felt it vital to settle the issue of coalition command as quickly as possible. U.S. Chief of Staff General Marshall’s comments at the Arcadia meeting of December 25 summed up the American view on the need for a supreme commander. These remarks were instrumental in convincing the British negotiators to accept the idea of a supreme commander and the loss of national oversight that might entail. General Marshall said:

As a result of what I saw in France and from following our own experience, I feel very strongly that the most important consideration is the question of unity of command. The

matters being settled here are mere details which will continuously reoccur unless settled in a broader way...I am convinced there must be one man in command of the entire theater – air, ground, and ships. We cannot manage by cooperation. Human frailties are such that there would be emphatic unwillingness to place portions of troops under another service. If we make a plan for unified command now, it will solve nine-tenths of our troubles.⁶³

After Marshall's persuasive plea, the members of the Arcadia meeting agreed to appoint a supreme commander for ABDACOM.

According to ABC-1 staff report published on March 27, 1941, one of the goals of the Arcadia conference was to identify the methods "to reach agreements concerning the nature of Military Cooperation between the two nations...both as to supreme Military control, and as to the unity of field command in the cases of strategic or tactical joint operations."⁶⁴ Both the United States and Britain understood the need to clarify command structures as early in the planning process as possible, both at the strategic and tactical level. It was just a matter of agreeing to a system that would satisfy both nations. Each side agreed to the need for one supreme commander, but they argued about who should get the job. Surprisingly, instead of the Americans advocating an American commander, and the British one of their own, it was the opposite. The Americans lobbied for a British commander because the British dominated the Southwest Pacific area politically. Although U.S. negotiators felt they were making a concession to the British in regards to overall command, the British were suspicious of the Americans' willingness to cede command and feared that the entire issue was a set up. They believed the Americans were already assuming that defeat was inevitable in the Southwest Pacific Theater

⁶³ Dwight D Eisenhower Library. Combined Chiefs of Staff: Conference proceedings, 1941-1945 Box 1/3 Folder 1 meeting minutes December 25, 1941

⁶⁴ This quotation is from the ABC-1 report of March 27, 1941. The report was reprinted in the *Pearl Harbor Hearings*, part 15, 1485-1550. The quotation appears on page 1487.

and wanted the British supreme commander to take the blame when the Japanese triumphed.⁶⁵

British generals, having received American commitment to the Germany First strategy, finally gave in to American arguments and agreed to the assignment of General Sir Archibald Wavell as Supreme Commander of the new Southwest Pacific Theater coalition. Called ABDACOM, the new command was activated on January 15, 1942 with headquarters at Batavia, Java.⁶⁶

The agreement at Arcadia to have one supreme commander may have solved “nine-tenths” of the troubles but it did not please everyone. The Dutch in particular were vocal in their displeasure at being excluded from the discussions that resulted in the appointment of General Wavell as Supreme Commander. To make things even more confusing, there was some disagreement between the Dutch government-in-exile based in London and the Dutch colonial government based in the Netherlands East Indies.⁶⁷ In the minutes from the December 28 meeting at the Arcadia conference, General Marshall’s views on the Dutch complaint are recalled as follows: “It appeared that the population of the Netherlands East Indies [was] feeling rather hurt at not having been consulted over the question of supreme command. They did not consider that the Dutch government in London [was] fully representative of them.”⁶⁸ The most visible result of the complaints by the Dutch in the East Indies was the establishment of the ABDACOM headquarters in Java. Even though Batavia was centrally located in the overall

⁶⁵ Specter. *Eagle against the Sun*, 127-128

⁶⁶ Matloff and Snell. *Strategic Planning*, 123-124

⁶⁷ On May 10, 1940 Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands. Queen Wilhelmina was forced to flee London. The Dutch armed forces surrendered on May 15, 1940 and the Queen formed a government-in-exile based in London. Weinberg, p. 122-129

⁶⁸ Dwight D Eisenhower Library. Combined Chiefs of Staff: Conference proceedings, 1941-1945 Box 1/3 Folder 1 meeting minutes December 28, 1941

ABDACOM Theater, it was chosen to appease the Dutch and keep them on board in the early days of the coalition.⁶⁹

From its very inception ABDACOM was at the center of a delicate political coalition whose members had vastly different national aims and concerns. The makeup of the ABDACOM staff and its command organization reflected the political realities involved with forming a coalition rather than the wishes of the Supreme Allied Commander.⁷⁰ Though the United States and Great Britain were the obvious powers in ABDA, the Dutch and the Australian governments believed they should be kept informed and involved. The opening sentence of the directive from the Arcadia conference to General Wavell is an exercise in political misinformation, made for the sole purpose of appeasing the involved parties. The sentence begins, “By agreement among the governments of Australia, The Netherlands, The United Kingdom and the United States, hereinafter referred to as the ABDA governments...”⁷¹ The statement implied that representatives from the Netherlands and Australia were consulted on the contents of the directive when, in fact, there were no Australian or Dutch representatives present at the Arcadia meetings.

While the Arcadia conference was held to formulate the grand strategy of the Allies, it also dealt with specific national disagreements relating to immediate military needs worldwide. Though the United States was forced into the war by the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt still supported the Germany First strategy. He had to convince the American home front that it was vital to defeat the fascist ideals of the Germans first in order to assure total

⁶⁹ Dwight D Eisenhower Library. Combined Chiefs of Staff: Conference proceedings, 1941-1945 Box 1/3 Folder 1 meeting minutes December 28, 1941

⁷⁰ See appendix 1 and figure 3 for a listing of the ABDACOM command structure.

⁷¹ Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, Annex 3 to JCCSs-6. Annex title page.

victory. Defeating the Japanese would have to wait until the war in Europe was over. To the American public this was a war to defend freedom, and it was vital that the government convince them that defense of freedom might entail preservation of some European empires. The stress on the ideology of freedom created propaganda problems for the Roosevelt administration at home. The President had to explain how the United States could fight for the ideals of free government if the result helped the British maintain their colonial empire. Many American isolationists, including Charles Lindbergh, opposed U.S. entry into the war for this very reason. Lindbergh argued that the British were luring America into war to help regain past glory.⁷² Thankfully for Roosevelt, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor forced his hand and deflated the isolationists' argument in one fell swoop.

Although the British were determined to hold onto as much of their former empire as possible, the defeat of Germany was their first priority. Having been fighting for two years prior to the Arcadia conference, the British General Staff was well prepared and more organized than the American representatives from the Army and Navy. This experience allowed the British to direct the general discussion and assure the United States' cooperation in the Germany First strategy. Churchill feared that the anger generated by the Pearl Harbor attack might force Roosevelt to accede to public pressure and attack Japan first. The Prime Minister worked diligently to prevent such an outcome.⁷³ Once the grand strategy was agreed upon, the British were willing to compromise on the creation of a coalition in the Far East. Churchill had addressed Great Britain's most desperate needs and could therefore afford some concessions when it came to formation of the ABDACOM command structure. After the British secured the

⁷² Hunt. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 148-149

⁷³ Spector. *Eagle Against the Sun*, 123

Germany First strategy, they willingly agreed to place General Sir Archibald Wavell in command of ABDA.

The Dutch government was also concerned about maintaining its colonial hold over the East Indies. With their national homeland occupied by Nazi Germany, the Dutch had the added objective of maintaining any free Dutch-controlled territory that remained. For the Dutch, the East Indies was their last stronghold, even though their control over the colony had historically been tenuous at best. Even their coalition partners questioned the ability of the Dutch government to defend its own colony.⁷⁴

Australia was also concerned with maintaining control of its territories in the Southwest Pacific. As a member of the British Commonwealth, Australia felt that it could no longer count on the United Kingdom to assure its defense. The majority of the Australian military was already fighting in Africa for the British and Australian Prime Minister John Curtin felt that Churchill was not responsive enough to Australia's needs. The fear of outright Japanese invasion drove the Australians to develop closer relations with the United States, adding more tension to the international coalition.⁷⁵

Missing Links in the Chain of Command

The differing national aims of each participating government in the ABDA coalition created tension, both on the political and military level. General Wavell's assignment as Supreme Commander mitigated national differences but did not eliminate them. These tensions meant that General Wavell was stepping not only into a military maelstrom, but a political one as

⁷⁴ Stark Memo. 3

⁷⁵ Nicholas Evan Sarantakes. *Allies Against the Rising Sun*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009) 108-109

well. He would need to fight the enemy on the battlefield while simultaneously pacifying the representatives of the governments involved in his command.

The preliminary proposal regarding the organization of ABDACOM was presented at the Arcadia meeting held on December 30, 1941. This proposal outlined the command's area of jurisdiction as well as the forces available to General Wavell. It reserved the right of the ABDA governments to choose the deputy commanders and required them to inform Wavell before reducing the strength of any force in their specific national areas of command. The proposal also informed General Wavell of the general strategy to be pursued. ABDACOM's primary mission was to hold the Malay Barrier. Then "as additional forces become available, it will become possible to take the offensive and ultimately conduct an all-out offensive against Japan. The first essential is to gain general air superiority at the earliest possible moment, through the employment of concentrated air power."⁷⁶ The hope for eventual offensive operations was to prove as fleeting as ABDACOM itself.

Wavell's orders were broad in scope and quite bold considering his lack of available forces. Although the proposal directed him to hold the line and go on the offensive as soon as conditions allowed, it also prohibited him from requesting any troops above and beyond those assigned by the ABDA governments. General Wavell also lacked time. He had only a few days in which to set up his defenses and make the plans to carry out the Combined Chiefs of Staff directives.

The Arcadia directive creating ABDACOM reinforced the new command's limitations. Paragraph thirteen, properly entitled "Limitations," effectively undermined Wavell's ability to

⁷⁶ Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, Annex 3 to JCCSs-6. Paragraph 5

function as a truly supreme commander by stating: “Interference is to be avoided in the administrative process of the armed forces of any of the ABDA governments, including free communication between them and their respective governments.”⁷⁷ Simply put, Wavell was in overall command, but with the stipulation that he not interfere with the internal workings of any of the national forces under his command. The instruction not to interfere with national organizations meant that each nation’s forces were less bound to the supreme commanders’ overall strategic vision and more beholden to their own, often differing, national aspirations. Dutch concern with the protection of Java and British concern about the defense of Malaya and Singapore, all colonial possessions of the governments mentioned, were often perceived as having more political import than a unified operations strategy.

The limitations imposed in paragraph thirteen in the Arcadia directive were reinforced by a provision in paragraph fourteen. This paragraph stated in part, “Commanders of all land and air forces within your Area will be immediately informed by their respective governments that... all orders and instructions issued by you *in conformity with the provisions of the directive* will be considered by such commanders as emanating from their respective governments.”⁷⁸ In other words, the Supreme Commander could give orders without interference only if they did not conflict with the provisions of the directive. This order directly followed one in which the commander’s “instructions and orders will be limited to those necessary for the effective coordination of forces in the execution of your mission.” At this stage the directives of paragraphs thirteen and fourteen were confusing and contradictory. These instructions limited

⁷⁷ Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, Annex 3 to JCCSs-6. Paragraph 13

⁷⁸ Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, Annex 3 to JCCSs-6. Paragraph 14, italics added by author for emphasis.

General Wavell's options for creating ABDACOM attack plans. The Supreme Commander could not adopt a strategy that required the transfer of units or personnel without the pre-approval of the national governments involved in ABDA. Nor could he undertake the reorganization of command structures to simplify or make more efficient intelligence gathering, communications, or the ability to react to Japanese movements within the ABDACOM area.

Should any subordinate disagree with an order from the Supreme Commander or feel that an order violated the directives laid out in paragraphs thirteen and fourteen, paragraph fifteen provided them with an option to delay compliance until consultations with their home government were possible: "If any of your immediate subordinates...considers that obedience to your orders would jeopardize the national interests of his country to an extent unjustified by the general situation in the ABDA Area, he has the right... to appeal direct to his own government *before* carrying out the orders."⁷⁹ The wording of this directive meant that any protest from a subordinate commander to his national leadership would put a halt to operations until the political powers involved could meet and make a decision. The delay caused by such a complaint would make the adoption of coherent tactical plans nearly impossible. General Wavell had to be conscious of this limitation when formulating general ABDACOM plans.

The paragraph fifteen limitations imposed upon the Supreme Allied Commander revealed that the concept of unity of command would go only so as far as the political leadership of the coalition would allow. In this early attempt at coalition the concept of unity of command and the reality of the command were two very different things. The ensuing rapid collapse of ABDACOM can partly be attributed to the fact that Wavell never had the full backing of the

⁷⁹ Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, Annex 3 to JCCSs-6. Paragraph 15. Italics added by author.

Allied government leaders or full control over the international forces he commanded.

Nominally the Supreme Allied Commander, in reality General Wavell presided over three distinct groups of national military organizations, which often failed to assist one another if it meant subordinating their own national strategic objectives to that of the Allies.

Concern about the size of the chain of command was not a consideration of the political leaders who created it. The size and composition of the command structure assured that the governments of each nation felt represented in the coalition. However, efforts to placate the political sensitivities of the coalition governments created a large and convoluted system whose members were inexperienced in melding different national forces into a unified coalition. General Wavell understood the problems that were inherent in such a large, multinational and officer-heavy command structure. On January 5, 1942 Wavell received communications from the British Chiefs of Staff in London suggesting some British generals to fill the gaps in the forming command structure. In reply to their request for Air Marshal Peirse of the RAF to head up the Allied Air Force, Wavell reminded the chiefs back home that “such an appointment may raise delicate issues with Dutch and Americans whose air forces are integral part of navy and army.”⁸⁰ Concerns about appeasing coalition members were already affecting the Supreme Commander’s ability to lead.

Political issues relating to the nationality of the officers in charge of each service arm in ABDACOM delayed Wavell’s assembly of the high command in Java. Those same questions also kept Wavell aware of the fact that each of the appointed generals or admirals was expected

⁸⁰ Connell, *Wavell, Supreme Commander*, 80. Wavell did eventually take on Air Marshall Peirse as the ABDAAIR commander though he did not arrive in the theater until the second week of February.

to advocate his own nation's objectives and answer to his nation's leaders as much as he was expected to follow the orders of the Supreme Commander of ABDACOM.

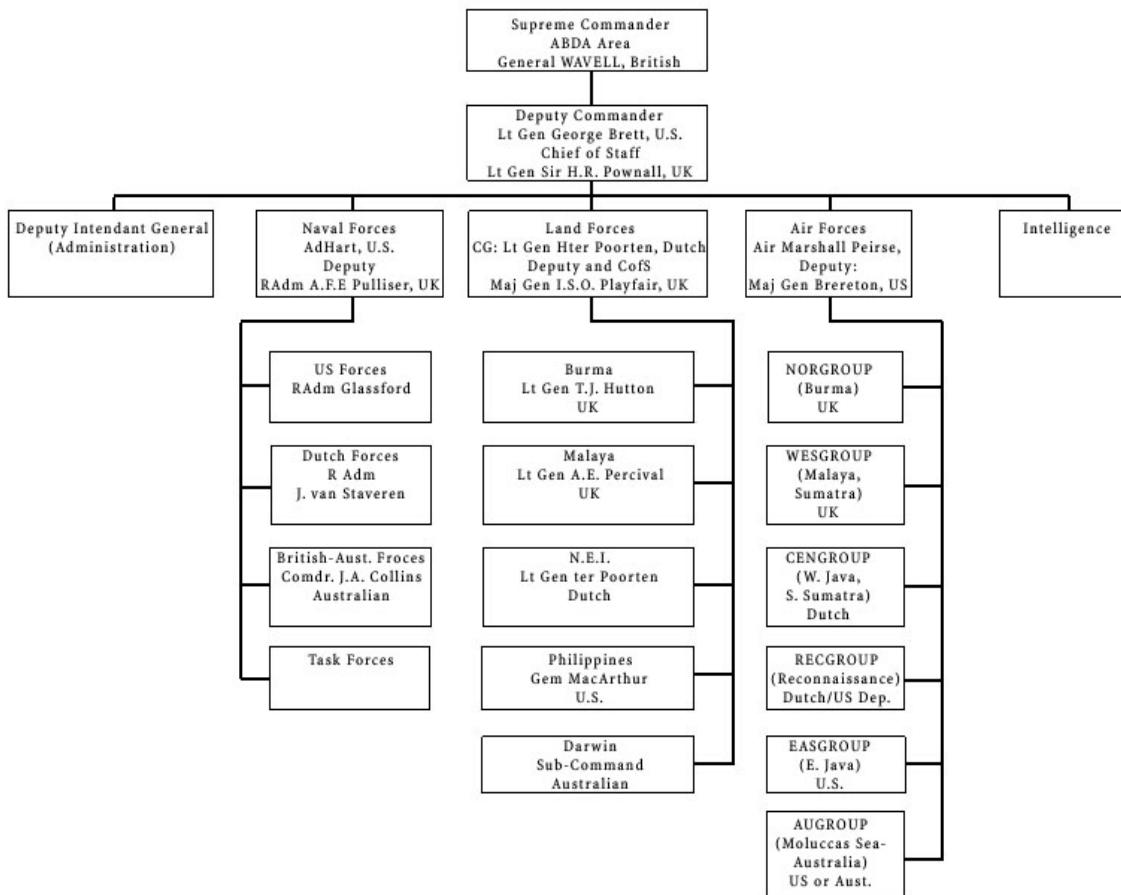


Figure 3. Chain of Command Table for ABDACOM. January-February 1942.
Image courtesy Center for Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff, in consultation with Wavell were eventually able to fill most of the ABDACOM command slots shown in Figure 4.⁸¹ Directly subordinate to General Wavell was General George Brett of the United States. British General Henry Pownall, the Chief of Staff for ABDACOM, assisted General Brett. The second echelon of command was divided into three major commands, with each command divided along service lines. Naval,

⁸¹ Appendix A gives a more complete list of ABDACOM's command structure.

land, and air forces were each separate and reported directly to Wavell's headquarters. The Combined Chiefs of Staff divided command of those three divisions equally between the nations involved in ABDACOM. Air Marshal Peirse of the United Kingdom commanded the air forces, while Lt. General Hein Ter Poorten of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army commanded the ground forces. U.S. Admiral Thomas Hart was chosen to lead ABDACOM's navy. The organization of each sub-command was divided according to the commander's preference. The naval areas of responsibility were arranged by nationality so that each nation's fleet units maintained their pre-war command structure. The land and air forces, meanwhile, were divided geographically, with each area remaining under the command of the local force commanders. In both cases high command in ABDACOM was shuffled to please the political leadership, but command at corps level and lower was left intact. This table of organization kept disruption of the front line units to a minimum. ABDACOM was so short lived and left such a sparse collection of official documents that it is unknown if every command position was filled. Based upon the speed with which the command was organized it is highly likely that some of the commanders filled two billets, filling empty command slots below them in the chain of command. It is equally possible that Wavell never had the opportunity to assign officers to each slot. Some commanders were assigned a slot but did not arrive in Java before the fall of ABDACOM.⁸²

Too Many Chefs Spoil the Pot

The political conflict over the appointment of ABDACOM commanders was most evident in the appointment of U.S. Admiral Thomas Hart, who was named commander of the

⁸² For example, Air Marshall Richard Peirse did not arrive in Java until mid February. General Lewis Brereton organized ABDAAIR operations in his absence.

ABDACOM naval forces. Hart was nearing the end of a long and distinguished career. He was already commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet and was well positioned to assume command of the Allied naval forces that would comprise ABDACOM's sea power. However, Admiral Hart was not sure he should accept the command, correctly predicting that the Dutch would take umbrage at his selection. Ultimately, he did as ordered. Upon his appointment Hart worked tirelessly to unify fleet units of the United States, Britain, the Netherlands East Indies and Australia.

The forces at Hart's disposal were not inconsiderable; nevertheless, they were not of a caliber to stop the strong and modern Japanese Navy. The strongest ships available to Hart were a collection of eleven heavy and light cruisers as mismatched as they were old.⁸³ Moreover the cruisers were from four different navies, with the British and the Australian contingents the only ones familiar with the others' operational doctrine. Although the fleet divisions continued to be organized along national lines, the overall force was so under-strength that Admiral Hart was forced to combine thinly spread task forces on an ad hoc basis to try and stem the Japanese advance. Based on his assessment of the forces arrayed against him, Hart wisely adopted a conservative plan that involved locating enemy invasion forces and attacking Japanese landings. He intended to avoid a Mahanian-style fleet-to-fleet battle where he would be at a great disadvantage.

Hart knew that unless a unified strategy was agreed upon, ABDACOM could lapse into national bickering.⁸⁴ Ironically, the most serious case of this resulted in Hart's removal from command. The Dutch, unhappy that one of their own admirals was not chosen to lead the

⁸³ Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, box 1 folder 1

⁸⁴ James Leutze. *A Different Kind Of Victory: A Biography of Admiral Thomas C. Hart* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1981) 254

combined fleet in what were essentially Dutch waters, constantly complained about Hart and worked to have him replaced by the ranking Dutch naval officer, Admiral Conrad Helfrich. The Dutch were unhappy with Hart's strategy, which was to marshal his forces until they could be used to overpower a smaller Japanese force. Instead, the Dutch pressed for an all-out offensive to meet the Japanese fleet wherever it was to be found. They believed Dutch Admiral Helfrich was the man most qualified to adopt this strategy. Admiral Hart, according to the Dutch, was too timid.⁸⁵

Timid or not, Admiral Hart commanded the only battle that might be considered a success for ABDA's naval forces. On January 24, 1942 the Japanese were preparing to land an invasion force to take the airfield and oil fields surrounding the city of Balikpapan, Borneo. Admiral Hart, in command only two weeks, ordered his subordinate, Admiral William Glassford, to take the 59th U.S. Destroyer Division and prevent the Japanese landing. The 59th Division consisted of four World War I-vintage destroyers, the *Paul Jones*, *Parrot*, *Pope*, and *John D. Ford*, and the light cruisers *Boise* and *Marblehead*. Unfortunately for Admiral Glassford, he lost the use of the light cruisers before arriving at Balikpapan. The *Boise* struck a reef not on her charts and the *Marblehead* experienced engine problems, limiting her speed and forcing her to drop behind the rest of the division. After losing the use of his light cruisers Admiral Glassford ordered his World War I-era destroyers to press on. The Japanese landing force consisted of twelve transport ships and patrol boat escorts. Other destroyer escorts had sailed north in search of a Dutch submarine that had earlier sunk one of the Japanese transports. Despite Japan's

⁸⁵ Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 228; Leutze. *A Different Kind of Victory*, 271-273

numerical advantage, its landing force was caught by surprise at the appearance of the four unescorted U.S. destroyers.⁸⁶

The destroyers, under the command of Commander Paul H. Talbot, took advantage of the lack of Japanese escorts and attacked the transports lying at anchor off the coast of Borneo. Unsure of the location of the enemy destroyer force, the U.S. destroyers made two passes through the Japanese transports, using both torpedoes and naval artillery fire to sink four of the transport ships. Only the *John D. Ford* sustained minor damage during the three-hour long battle. The destroyers' success, however, did not prevent the Japanese landing; the garrison at Balikpapan was defeated the following day.⁸⁷

The Japanese had been caught by surprise, but not stopped. The small ABDA naval force managed to sink some Japanese transports while sustaining no serious losses. The Battle of Balikpapan was exactly the type of battle that Admiral Hart felt would extend the life of ABDACOM: small, hit and run attacks that took advantage of locally superior strength and negated the strength of the enemy. Hart was in essence attempting to fight the naval equivalent of an asymmetrical war. Possessing naval strength far less than that of his enemy, Admiral Hart was determined to extract every advantage possible. The Battle of Balikpapan was unique among the ABDACOM naval engagements: the available force consisted solely of American ships. The Dutch and British components of the ABDA fleet were spread across the Southwest Pacific Theater engaged in convoy protection missions. Thus, for this battle, there were no communication problems and the entire division operated with the same doctrine. Later ABDACOM naval engagements would not benefit from the same homogenous organization.

⁸⁶ Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 198-200

⁸⁷ Paul Dull. *The Imperial Japanese Navy*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978) 62-63

The hybrid naval force assembled by ABDA never had the time to develop the operational unity that Glassford's Task Force 5 enjoyed. ABDACOM's mixed naval forces did not taste victory again.

Creating a homogenous whole out of the ragtag fleets of different nations was what the ABDA navy commander needed to do in order to have any hope of delaying the Japanese advance. At a time when the naval leadership should have been organizing, creating common doctrine and melding the Allied ships into a unified fighting force, they instead were preoccupied with a petty nationalist squabble at the highest levels of command. The Dutch government was unwilling to cede naval command in its own waters and felt that only a commander chosen from their own navy could properly represent Dutch national objectives. The end result of their complaints was the relief of Admiral Hart on February 10, 1942 for "health reasons."⁸⁸ To placate the Dutch, Admiral Helfrich was appointed by the CCS to succeed Admiral Hart.

Admiral Hart was the only upper echelon commander in ABDACOM who maintained an objective long-range outlook when planning naval sorties. Hart's plans were influenced by the strategy laid out in the Rainbow 5 plan. As an American Admiral Hart had no ties to the territory he was fighting to defend. The Dutch and British commanders, meanwhile, were fighting for land they considered a part of their nation. Therefore, only the American contingent of ABDACOM was politically able to keep retreating while rebuilding their military strength for the ultimate thrust at the heart of the Japanese Empire. The United States was the only coalition member that could afford to keep trading space for time, since the loss of the ABDACOM area would not seriously hamper America's capacity for war. Other Allied commanders in ABDA were demoralized by the rapid and massive losses inflicted by the Japanese. British leaders had

⁸⁸ Spector. *Eagle against the Sun*, 132-133

the option of pulling back to the Indian Ocean, which they did after the humiliating losses of Singapore and Burma. The Dutch were the only group with no recourse. If Java were to fall the Netherlands East Indies would cease to exist. Admiral Helfrich and his Dutch Army counterpart General Ter Poorten had no option but to fight to the bitter end.

The petty squabble that led to the replacement of Admiral Hart as naval commander after only a few weeks added to the confusion and tension that already existed in ABDACOM by the end of February.⁸⁹ In fact, confusion was one of the hallmarks of the short-lived coalition. With each nation maintaining formal control over their national forces, building a culture of cooperation proved problematic. During the short operational life of ABDACOM there were several events that demonstrated that cooperation between nations would be difficult. One instance of non-cooperation happened after the fall of Singapore on February 15, 1942. General Wavell was unhappy that U.S. and Dutch naval forces did not push to the west to disrupt Japanese landings in Malaya or on Sumatra. Admiral Hart had determined that his naval forces would be better used to slow the Japanese advance from the Philippines and protect the supply line from Java to Australia. He felt that attempting to support Singapore was not the most effective use of the small and outmatched ABDA fleet. The British disagreed with Admiral Hart. They felt the American admiral had been too timid in interpreting his orders. British commanders also felt the Dutch were holding back their naval forces for the protection of their own colony instead of using them for the good of the entire command. Of course, from the British point of view Singapore was the most important part of the Southwest Pacific Theater and demanded the utmost effort be made to protect it. Such effort was not forthcoming, and after the citadel fell the British simply ceased to respond to ABDACOM requests in a timely manner.

⁸⁹ Leutze. *A Different Kind of Victory*, 254-255

Thus, when the U.S. and Dutch naval commanders requested help from the remaining British air power assets they were denied. In his book *The Lonely Ships*, author Edwin Hoyt described the problems with coordinating British air support: “The British had the only significant air power in the area, and they would not commit it to support naval action in the Dutch and American sectors.”⁹⁰ The lack of British aerial support was just one of the many factors that proved costly to ABDACOM’s navy in every later encounter with the Japanese fleet.

The Problems of Babel

“If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

Genesis 11: 6-7.

The most obvious example to highlight the cohesion and communication problems that were widespread in the ABDACOM coalition is the Battle of the Java Sea, the first major naval battle of the Pacific War after the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor. The Battle of the Java Sea was a costly defeat for the coalition. The consensus among historians is that the failure of the Allied fleet at Java Sea assured the final dissolution of ABDACOM and the loss of the Malay Barrier.⁹¹ However, when looking at the situation facing the entire theater it is evident that the coalition was in the midst of wholesale collapse even before the Battle of the Java Sea decimated ABDACOM’s naval power. The destruction of ABDACOM was not decided by the Battle of the Java Sea, which was simply the coda to the short life of the coalition.

⁹⁰ Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 239

⁹¹ Spector. *The Eagle Against the Sun*, 134; Dull. *The Imperial Japanese Navy*, 87

Admiral Hart's departure on February 11, 1942 was a precursor to the collapse of the entire ABDA Theater. Japanese forces were moving south against little resistance. General Wavell was low on troops, equipment, ammunition and morale. When Singapore fell on February 15, the bulk of British and Australian ground forces were captured. Java now contained the only remaining effective army units. These units were a mix of Dutch and native colonial troops with a smattering of Australian and American anti-aircraft and artillery units.⁹² Total available ground forces on Java were just over three divisions, all under-strength, poorly trained and obsoletely armed divisions. The Japanese countered with three divisions of highly trained, well-equipped, and battle-tested veterans. Wavell had little chance of winning on the ground with the limited forces available in Java.⁹³

ABDACOM was also woefully short of air power. General Lewis Brereton was acting air commander in place of Air Marshal Richard Peirse, who never arrived in Java to assume his command. General Brereton did not have sufficient air assets at the start of ABDACOM and his available aircraft numbers steadily dropped throughout the life of the coalition. The air forces of ABDACOM were composed primarily of obsolete aircraft. In the Netherlands East Indies the Dutch had nearly 200 aircraft, while the Americans could add just over 100. Three Hundred aircraft were the total air defense that the Allies could muster to protect Java, which was Japan's main target after Singapore.⁹⁴ The Allies had so few planes in the theater that they were ineffective in any role. The need for effective combat aircraft was so desperate that at one point

⁹² Eisenhower Presidential archives. Combined Chiefs of Staff minutes. *Conference Proceedings, 1941-1945*, box 1 folder 1

⁹³ A. P. Wavell. *Despatch by the Supreme Commander of the ABDA Area to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in the South-West Pacific* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1948) 16

⁹⁴ John Toland. *But Not In Shame: The Six Months After Pearl Harbor*. (New York: Random House, 1961) 241

lumbering PBY patrol bombers were forced into anti-ship bombing missions for which they were ill suited for.⁹⁵ This shortcoming meant the Japanese enjoyed control of the air from the outset of the invasion of the Southwest Pacific. With each Japanese advance ABDACOM lost more planes. By the coalition's end in February 1941, it had only a handful of operational fighters left to defend the entire 4,100-mile length of the Malay Barrier.⁹⁶

General Brereton's command suffered from the same problems that beset Admiral Hart. Each nation's air force operated as separate entities even though the entire theater was under one coalition command. Centralized control was nearly impossible. The British units were all based in Malaya and Sumatra until after the fall of Singapore when they were pulled to the west to regroup in India and Ceylon. Dutch air power was concentrated on Borneo and Java. With the early loss of Borneo to the Japanese, Java became the final defensive line. American squadrons were either survivors of the retreat south from the Philippines or newly arrived units from the West Coast that had been diverted from reinforcing the Philippines.⁹⁷

After four weeks of constant combat, ABDA's air and land forces were a shadow of their original strength. By February 15, the Southwest Pacific Theater was almost cut in half with the Japanese controlling all of the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Ambon, Celebes, Bali, and most of Sumatra.⁹⁸ The British were pulling back to India while the Americans were shifting existing reinforcement convoys to Australia and New Guinea. The Combined Chiefs of Staff wrote off ABDACOM after the fall of Singapore and simply hoped to gain time with the continued defense of Java, no matter how short that defense was.

⁹⁵ Womack. *The Dutch Naval Air Force Against Japan*, 68-69

⁹⁶ Lewis H. Brereton. *The Brereton Diaries: 3 October 1941- 8 May 1945*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1946) 96-98

⁹⁷ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 64-68

⁹⁸ See Figure 4

From the middle of January the naval forces of ABDACOM had been forced to operate with little intelligence and no air cover. This situation gave the Japanese a significant advantage in later naval action against the remaining ABDA naval forces. On January 25, the new commander of the ABDA naval forces, Admiral Helfrich, had ordered his subordinate, Dutch Admiral Karel Doorman, to find and stop the suspected Japanese invasion fleet headed toward Java. Unbeknownst to the ABDACOM commanders was the location of the two Japanese invasion fleets headed to Java in mid-February; one approaching from the west from bases in Indochina and one from the east past the Philippines. Admiral Doorman could not locate the western convoy, but did find the eastern one on February 25.

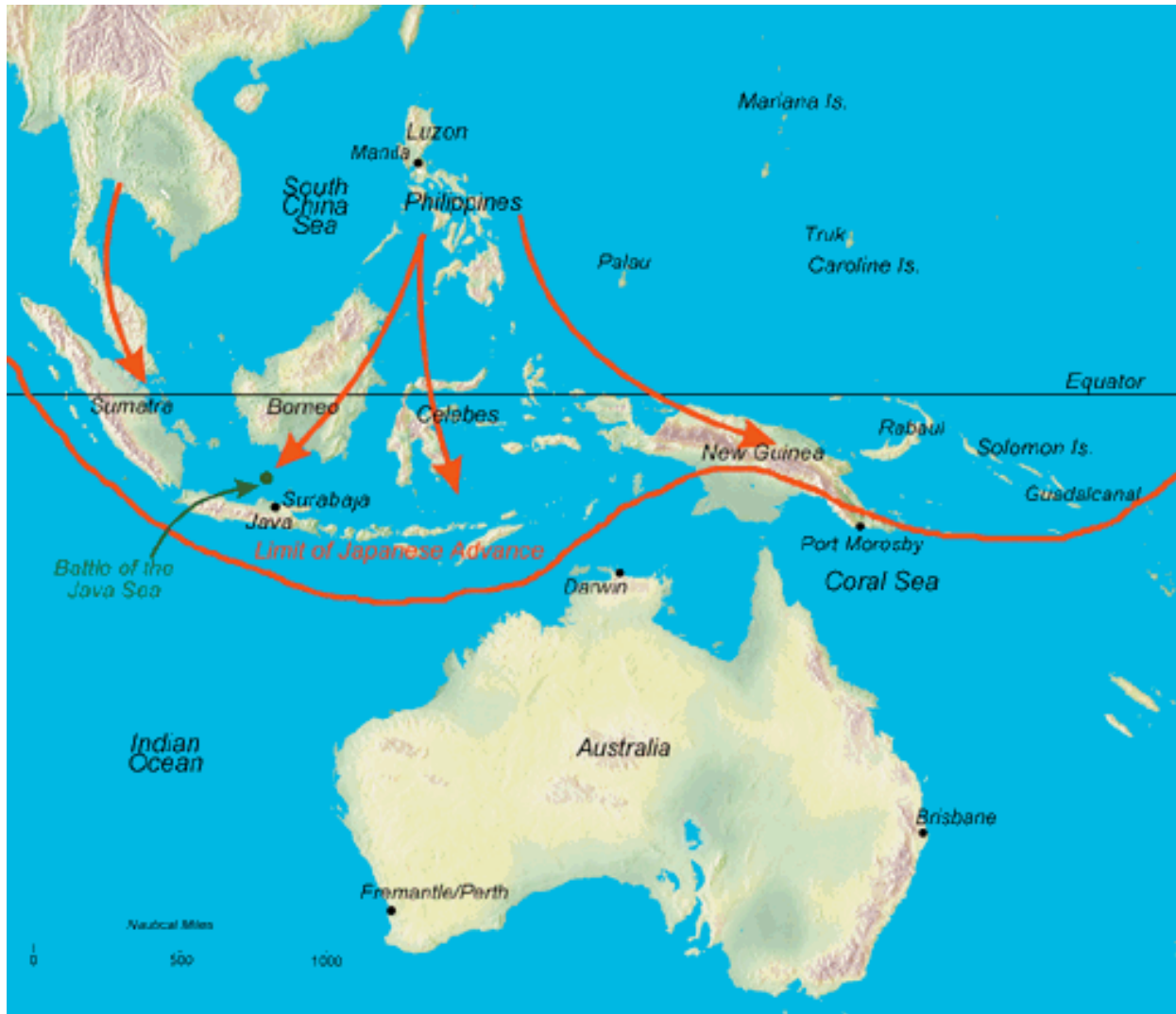


Figure 4. Japanese Invasion Routes in the Southwest Pacific Theater.

Image courtesy of the U.S. Navy.

Admiral Doorman had at his disposal the majority of the remaining ABDA fleet. His assembled force consisted of two heavy cruisers (HMS *Exeter* and USS *Houston*), three light cruisers (RNN *De Ruyter*, RNN *Java*, and HMAS *Perth*), and nine destroyers consisting of three British, two Dutch and four American ships.⁹⁹ The Japanese invasion force Doorman was about to attack was comprised of ten transports guarded by two heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and

⁹⁹ Two of the American Destroyers, the USS *John D. Ford* and the USS *Paul Jones* were veterans of the earlier mention Battle of Balikpapan.

fourteen destroyers, and had air cover from newly-captured bases on Borneo and Celebes.

ABDACOM intelligence knew the Japanese were sending invasion convoys from two directions but could only hope to attack one of them with the naval strength available.¹⁰⁰ Even attacking only one of the enemy's convoys, Admiral Doorman faced a stronger fleet that was well trained and enjoyed the advantage of air superiority. Doorman's ships, on the other hand, were an obsolete mix of ship classes, drawn from four different navies, and all suffered from a lack of scheduled repair and replenishment. Doorman's men were in little better condition. The added stress of being posted at their battle stations every day since the declaration of war against Japan had thoroughly exhausted the Allied sailors.¹⁰¹

The deficiencies of Doorman's small fleet were magnified by the coalition nature of the task force. There was no common communications system and the fleet had never trained together to develop common doctrine. This lack of coordination would have deadly consequences for the Allied ships. To make matters worse, Admiral Doorman had no chance of surprising the Japanese force because the enemy controlled the skies. Consequently the Japanese were ready when the ragtag ABDACOM fleet came over the horizon.¹⁰²

The first problem that can be directly attributed to lack of combined training among the ships of the Allied fleet was the confusion about Admiral Doorman's order of battle. U.S. doctrine would have put the destroyers in line between the Allied cruisers and the enemy force. Doorman had placed the three British destroyers in that position, but kept the two Dutch and four American destroyers on the opposite side of the column. Six of the nine destroyers were thus

¹⁰⁰ Dull. *The Imperial Japanese Navy*, 73

¹⁰¹ Hoyt's *The Lonely Ships* and Winslow's *Fleet the Gods Forgot* both give detailed accounts of the state of the ABDACOM fleet.

¹⁰² Dull. *The Imperial Japanese Navy*, 76; Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 249

screened by their own formation, making torpedo attacks on the enemy impossible. No one will ever know why Admiral Doorman arranged the formation as he did; he went down with his ship in the ensuing battle. It is certain, though, that shielding more than half of his destroyer strength was an error that confused the American and British captains and contributed to the Allied losses at the Battle of the Java Sea.¹⁰³

Contact between the fleets was made in late afternoon on February 27. Doorman, having no aerial reconnaissance to tell him the disposition of the Japanese force, decided that audacity was the best option and pushed on for a direct attack. Ordering the cruisers to attack speed revealed another problem with the coalition fleet: the cruiser column not only screened the Dutch destroyers, they were slower than the cruiser line, negating any possible use they might have had had they been properly positioned between their capital ships and the Japanese fleet.¹⁰⁴ Doorman was attacking a superior force, and his own captains were unsure of how he intended to press the attack.

The heterogeneous nature of the ABDA fleet presented another problem. The heavy cruisers *Exeter* and *Houston* had eight-inch guns equal in range to those of the Japanese heavy cruisers. The more modern Japanese heavy cruisers carried ten eight-inch guns each, while the older *Exeter* mounted six and the *Houston* had three triple eight-inch turrets for a total of nine guns. Unfortunately, the aft turret was inoperable due to bomb damage from an air attack the week before. The Japanese not only outgunned Doorman's force, but most of the Allied ships were out-ranged as well. Doorman's light cruisers mounted six-inch gun batteries that, at 15,000 yards, had a much shorter range than the 29,000-yard range of the eight-inch batteries on the

¹⁰³ Hornfischer. *Ship of Ghosts*, 71

¹⁰⁴ Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 250; W.G. Winslow. *The Ghost That Died at Sunda Strait*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984) 113

heavy cruisers.¹⁰⁵ This disparity in range meant that three of Doorman's five cruisers were helpless to return fire as the engagement started.

Lack of communications prevented Admiral Doorman from exercising effective control over his column as it closed range on the Japanese formation. The Allied fleet depended on a combination of radio and visual signals to communicate. The problem was that each nation had its own communications systems, preventing them from readily talking with ships from other nations. Radio frequencies were different from ship to ship. Even the semaphore flag code used by each navy was different. Further complicating matters was the problem of language. Admiral Doorman spoke Dutch while more than half of his fleet captains spoke English. Even the English-speaking ships had trouble understanding messages passed from ship to ship. Captain Walter Winslow described the fleet's jumbled communications system in his history of the USS *Houston*:

The fleet's jury-rigged communication system, which was primitive at best, consisted of a shortwave radio on board the *De Ruyter* over which orders were issued in Dutch to the *Houston*. A Netherlands Navy liaison officer stationed on the *Houston* translated these orders, which were then relayed by light or voice radio to the *Exeter*, the *Perth*, and our destroyers. To confuse things even more, the British, on occasion, used their own flag signals, which no one else could read. In many respects, it was the blind leading the blind.¹⁰⁶

In essence ABDA fleet communications were analogous to a game of telephone, with each person whispering the order to the next and praying that the person at the end of the line got an order that was substantially the same as the one that started the chain. The system was

¹⁰⁵ John Campbell. *Naval Weapons of World War Two*. (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1985) 31-33

¹⁰⁶ Winslow. *The Ghost That Died at Sunda Strait*, 113

cumbersome and prone to mistakes in the best of conditions. It would fail utterly in the heat of battle.

The *De Ruyter* was at the front of the Allied line, followed by the *Exeter*, *Houston*, *Perth*, and *Java*. At 15:45 the heavy cruisers on both sides opened fire. An hour later the Allied fleet took its first damage when the *Exeter* was hit and lost several boilers. With his ship's speed cut in half, the *Exeter's* Captain veered out of line, sowing confusion among the rest of the fleet. With poor communications made worse in the heat of battle, each captain had to guess why the *Exeter* had turned. Following the *Exeter's* course change the entire line turned ninety degrees to port and all semblance of battle formation was lost. Japanese torpedoes began to hit the Allied formation at this point and one of the Dutch destroyers, the *Kortenaer*, exploded and sank. It was obvious that the ABDACOM fleet was outclassed and had no chance to carry the day.

Soon several more of Doorman's ships were damaged or sinking. The *Exeter* started to limp away from the battle, screened by the British and Dutch destroyers, and the rest of the fleet tried to regain some sense of order. The cruiser line was reformed by 17:15. However, with the loss of the *Exeter* only one heavy cruiser remained to hold off the Japanese onslaught. Both fleets maneuvered for position, losing and then reestablishing visual contact. It was 23:00 when further disaster struck the Allied fleet.¹⁰⁷

Having earlier sent the four American destroyers back to the base at Surabaya, Doorman was left with only three light cruisers and the damaged *Houston*.¹⁰⁸ In the final stages of the battle the Japanese forces were separated. Due to the constant maneuvering by both fleets only

¹⁰⁷ Dull. *The Imperial Japanese Navy*, 84

¹⁰⁸ The four destroyers refueled at Surabaya and on February 28 transited the Bali Strait. Surviving a brief encounter with Japanese destroyers, they then sailed on to Freemantle, Australia. They were some of the last ABDACOM ships to escape the Java Sea.

the two Japanese heavy cruisers were in a position to attack the remaining ABDACOM forces. At 22:52, the Japanese launched a salvo of long-lance torpedoes. Fourteen minutes later, the *De Ruyter* was struck aft of the bridge, quickly sinking and taking Admiral Doorman and over 300 of his crew with it. At 23:10, the *Java* was hit and suffered the same fate as the *De Ruyter*. Eight hours after it began, the Battle of the Java Sea ended in abject defeat for ABDACOM. Highlighted by lack of communication and no common doctrine the battle was a microcosm of the problems that were endemic to the ABDACOM coalition as a whole. The remnants of Doorman's fleet fled to the dubious safety of Java, only to be cornered and sunk two days later. The largest naval action of ABDACOM's short history had delayed the Japanese invasion fleet by a mere twenty-four hours.

Admiral Doorman fought with the tenacity of a cornered pit bull, damaging one enemy destroyer and sinking four transports, but was overwhelmed by superior forces that were operating as one homogenous whole. The piecemeal navy assembled by ABDACOM followed to the letter their last orders from the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The CCS, writing on February 19, had ordered that the island of "JAVA [sic] should be defended with the utmost resolution by all forces at present in the island. Every day gained is of importance."¹⁰⁹ The ABDACOM naval forces did their utmost to give the Combined Chiefs of Staff as much time as possible. They were ultimately hampered as much by their lack of coherent organization as they were by the rapidly expanding Japanese Empire.

Lack of organization was a problem at all levels of command. Another example of this poor command and communication organization at the top levels of ABDACOM's hierarchy involves the USS *Houston* and the HMAS *Perth*, whose story was recounted at the start of this

¹⁰⁹ NARA record group FDR-MR: Papers as President, Map Room File, 1939 -1945 FDR library.

essay. The two survivors of the disastrous Battle of the Java Sea had retreated to the port of Tanjong Priok to refuel and prepare for their escape from the Java Sea. ABDACOM had been disbanded, and the two battle-scarred ships were ordered by Admiral Helfrich to try and sail to Tjilatjap. At Tanjong Priok, the ships were delayed because their captains had to argue with the Dutch port authorities for access to the dwindling fuel supplies available at the naval base. The port still retained several hundred tons of fuel, but the Dutch port master was under orders to preserve it for Dutch ships. He was reluctant to fuel the American and Australian ships without direct orders from the Dutch commander. The fact that most of the remaining Dutch fleet had been lost at the Battle of the Java Sea on February 27 was apparently of little concern to the Dutch port authorities. Admiral Helfrich had ordered all of ABDACOM's ships out of waters north of Java on February 28, but shore-based commanders did not get the same orders.¹¹⁰ Communications between the different headquarters were so bad that the fuel depot never received orders to release their supplies to the fleeing ships. Eventually, after a delay of several hours the Perth was able to procure 300 tons of fuel but port authorities determined that the *Houston* had enough fuel for the run to Australia. On February 28 the two cruisers finally left Batavia.¹¹¹ Still in port was the Dutch destroyer *Evertson*. Her captain had not received his orders to accompany the two cruisers and would remain at Tanjong Priok, only to be sunk by the Japanese the following day.¹¹²

ABDACOM was too complex to deal with the rapidly evolving tactical realities of the South Pacific war. There was the argument and dissent between the Dutch and the American officers about how to utilize ABDACOM's naval assets that resulted in Admiral Hart being

¹¹⁰ Hoyt. *The Lonely Ships*, 267

¹¹¹ Hornfischer. *Ship of Ghosts*, 98-103

¹¹² Winslow. *The Ghost that Died at Sunda Strait*, 131-132

relieved and Dutch Admiral Helfrich assuming command of ABDAFLOAT.¹¹³ Relations between the commanders of different services were not acrimonious, but efficient cooperation was still lacking. Naval units could not get air cover and supply units did not have the orders to provide supplies to air or naval units from other Allied nations. Operational intelligence was not directed to those commanders who had the resources to react. Simply put, command structure was such a complicated morass that it was impossible to effectively use the available forces to stop the Japanese advance. The best results achieved were short delays of Japanese landings that did nothing to disrupt their overall invasion timetable.

A poorly conceived command structure and lack of a central headquarters prevented General Wavell from organizing and unifying the coalition in a timely manner. Poor infrastructure and communications prevented the separate headquarters of each service from communicating efficiently. Naval logistics and staff personnel at the naval base in Surabaya were headquartered as far as 400 miles from Wavell's main headquarters in Bandung. Admiral Helfrich had his headquarters in Batavia, ninety miles to the southeast of Wavell. Lack of infrastructure, poor roads, and enemy control of the skies made effective communications between Helfrich and Wavell all but impossible.¹¹⁴ ABDACOM's poor choices for the locations of headquarters created massive problems in communication and organization for the hastily assembled command.

A modern military with poor communications cannot hope to use its power to great effect. The complex nature of ABDACOM's chain of command meant that any problems would take time to move through the command system, time that ABDACOM did not have. The

¹¹³ See appendix 1

¹¹⁴ Douglas A. Cox. *Airpower Leadership On The Front Line*. (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 2006) 30-32

Japanese advance did not give General Wavell the luxury of time to create a coherent command system. A more streamlined command structure could have helped the Allies to better utilize the limited resources on hand in the south Pacific, and might have gained the Allies a few more days' defense before the fall of Java. However, command difficulties, compounded by the existing geographical limitations and logistics problems facing ABDA, made it impossible for the coalition forces to maintain operational focus and contributed to the failure to stop the Japanese advance and hold the Malay Barrier.

CHAPTER 3 - ABDA Logistics

The ABDACOM coalition began with severely limited military resources. Each of the four nations involved was faced with huge demands for troops and equipment in other theaters. At war with Germany and Italy for nearly two years, the British had fully invested their resources in the defense of the home islands and in the Mediterranean. The Dutch, meanwhile, had lost their homeland to German invasion in 1940 and the East Indies were the last stronghold of the Free Dutch military. The bulk of the Australian military was fighting alongside the British in North Africa. America, the latecomer among the Allies, entered the war before its military strength was fully mobilized and faced an immediate two-hemisphere war. Difficulty in moving, equipping and housing troops in the ABDACOM area was a critical bottleneck that prevented General Wavell from effectively carrying out his orders to stop the Japanese at the Malay Barrier.

Additionally, control of the Malay Barrier meant control of the route to the Indian Ocean. When the Japanese took the barrier, it forced the Allies to shift all resupply and reinforcement of their allies in Australia or China to either of two remaining routes. The first was from the U.S. West Coast to Australia, a journey of 6,200 miles, while the second route involved air transport over the Himalaya mountain range from India into China.¹¹⁵ Neither route provided speedy and efficient transport. Japanese control of the South Pacific also prevented relief from reaching the beleaguered U.S. defenders of the Philippine Islands, compelling U.S. and Filipino forces in the Philippines to surrender to Japanese forces in April 1942. Relief convoys could not get close to

¹¹⁵ San Francisco to Brisbane was the busiest of the U.S. to Australia convoy routes. Steven Anders, *Quartermaster Professional Bulletin*, 1999 (accessed at <http://www.qmfound.com/qmcpacific.htm> on 1-6-12)

the islands because of the rapid expansion of Japanese control over the sea and air routes in the Southwest Pacific.¹¹⁶ The loss of the Malay Barrier effectively cut the Allied logistics network in half.

Relocate

The countries that formed ABDACOM had so many preexisting commitments that it was impossible for them to properly equip and supply the forces arrayed against the Japanese. There were also problems with base infrastructure. No military can function without proper maintenance and repair depots. The Southwest Pacific Theater, due to its geographical composition, required an efficiently planned series of bases more than any other theater in World War II. The topography of the Theater made air and sea power the only effective way to control the area. Transportation infrastructure in the Southwest Pacific Theater was almost nonexistent, and most garrisons were cut off from one another by hundreds of miles of trackless jungle. Ground forces were therefore dependent on naval or air transport to move from garrison to garrison. Distance between bases was also a serious obstacle in ABDACOM's enormous area of operation. ABDACOM's defensive line along the Malay Barrier stretched over 4,000 miles from the island of New Guinea in the east to the island of Sumatra in the west. Longitudinally, ABDACOM controlled 2,000 miles from Manila to Darwin. ABDACOM was responsible for the defense of the entire area. The only way to supply or reinforce most cities and ports in the Southwest Pacific Theater was with transport ships.

Geography played a major role in dictating location and development of bases in the Pacific, especially the ABDACOM area.¹¹⁷ The Pacific Ocean in general and the Southwest

¹¹⁶ Arcadia minutes, January, 1941

Pacific Theater in particular had few deep-water ports suitable for development as naval refit and repair bases.¹¹⁷ The Australian port of Darwin, which was the Allied staging area for reinforcements destined for Java, was over 1,000 miles from the next nearest Australian deep-water port. Distance, even when war material was in the ABDA Theater, caused major problems with maintaining supplies of manpower and equipment.

To control the air and the sea, the Allies required developed, strategically-located bases for their naval and air forces. In addition to forward operating bases, access to repair depots in the rear areas was a vital component of keeping ABDACOM forces supplied and in good operating condition.

¹¹⁷ The best analysis of how Pacific Islands influenced the course of the War in the Pacific can be found in Rottmann's *Pacific Islands in World War II*

¹¹⁸ Walter D. Edmunds. *They Fought With What They Had*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951) 250

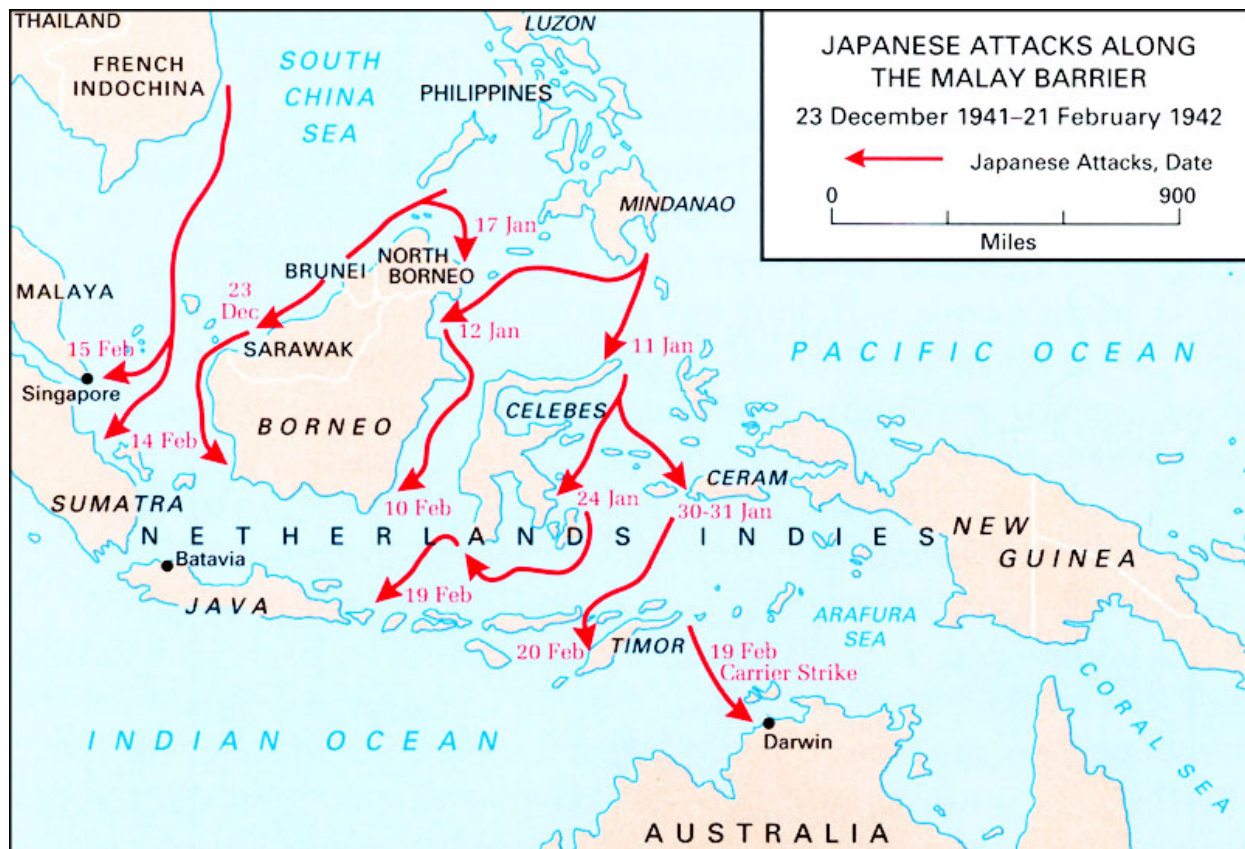


Figure 5. Japanese Attacks Along the Malay Barrier.

Image courtesy of the Center for Military History.

The spatial relationship of the bases also worked against ABDA and favored the Japanese (see figure 6). Geographically the region resembles a clamshell with the Philippine islands forming the narrow hinge in the north. Moving south from Manila in the Philippines, transportation routes radiate outward toward the Malay Barrier. The physical locations of the islands meant that the Japanese, pushing in a southerly direction had the advantage of starting from a compact system of bases and could choose any number of routes to attack the Malay Barrier. The Allies on the other hand were forced to start from a widely dispersed position, spreading their resources along a 4,000-mile front. As the Japanese advanced toward Java,

taking airfields and bases along the way, they quickly overran the shallow ABDACOM defenses.¹¹⁹

The British had extensive bases at Hong Kong and Singapore. With the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese on December 25, 1941, the British were left with only one developed naval base in the ABDA Theater. The British also had several airfields on the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, all of which were stretched laterally along the Malay Barrier. The position of British bases in the Far East kept Wavell focused on keeping Singapore out of Japanese hands. If Singapore fell, the British would be forced to fall back to Burma and India leaving the entire western end of the Malay Barrier unprotected.¹²⁰

The Dutch maintained developed naval bases at Tanjong Priok in west Java and Surabaya in east Java. Java also contained the most developed airfields in the Netherlands East Indies. In peacetime the Dutch had used seaplanes for most of the transportation between islands, building rudimentary seaplane bases on the islands surrounding Java. The bulk of base development in the Netherlands East Indies was stretched along the line of the Malay Barrier as it was in the British colonies to the west.¹²¹

Australia's massive size and relative lack of population centers also posed an obstacle to supplying the Allies. In northern Australia, nearest to Java, there was one town with a deep-water port, Darwin. It was the strategic Allied anchor on the east end of the Malay Barrier but was unfit for use as a major military base in January 1941. Many observers doubted that Darwin would ever be suitable as a naval base. U.S. Navy Captain W. Winslow described the geographic difficulties Darwin posed:

¹¹⁹ Edmunds. *They Fought With What They Had*, 250-251

¹²⁰ Connell. *Wavell: Supreme Commander*, 90-91

¹²¹ Womack. *The Dutch Naval Air Force Against Japan*, 29-31

In truth, Darwin was dismally situated for a naval base...the nearest marine overhaul and repair facility of any consequence was in southern Australia, about 1,800 miles away. Although Darwin's harbor is deep, it is cursed with a 24-foot tide, and its entrance is vulnerable to mining. No railroads came within several hundred miles of the place, and all the roads were primitive, at best. Supplies in quantity could be bought in only by ship. Fighter protection was nonexistent...¹²²

Winslow's description of Darwin's usefulness as a naval base could hold true for most of the other bases that the Allies held in the Southwest Pacific Theater, though base had specific deficiencies.

The United States had no bases along the Malay Barrier. U.S. interests in the Pacific had dictated base development in the central Pacific stretching from Pearl Harbor in Hawaii to Cavite in the Philippines. All of these U.S. bases, with the exception of Pearl Harbor, were in Japanese hands by the end of December 1941. Loss of their bases in the central Pacific meant that the United States needed to develop an alternate route to get supplies from the home front to the frontlines in the Far East. The alternative route they developed was much longer as it had to swing south to avoid the Japanese advance into the Solomon Islands. Military analysts were divided on Japan's ability to carry the attack to Fiji and New Caledonia along the southern convoy route. In February 1941 the CCS met and determined that the United States would garrison the islands along the route, including American Samoa, Bora Bora, Christmas Island, and Palmyra. New Zealand would garrison the Fiji Islands, while New Caledonia was under the flag of the Free French.¹²³ The effort, manpower, and resources spent to maintain this supply line meant that there was less material to aid ABDACOM.

¹²² Winslow, *The Fleet The Gods Forgot*, 30

¹²³ CCS meeting minutes, February 1941.

Geography in the south Pacific gave the Japanese a true military advantage during the early months of World War II. Japanese forces were operating on relatively short interior lines of communication, while the Allies were forced to defend a front several thousands of miles long. The Allies' inability to develop suitable base facilities in the area also diminished their ability to halt the Japanese advance in the Southwest Pacific Theater.

Replace

The Japanese advantage is even more pronounced when their equipment is compared with that of ABDACOM. The Allied forces were equipped with obsolete and outmoded equipment. Most of the weapons systems available in the ABDACOM Theater were either designed in the 1930s or were relics from World War I. Almost all were inferior to the equipment used by the Japanese. Obsolete equipment, such as the Brewster Buffalo fighter aircraft used primarily by British, Dutch, and Australian forces, was common in the Southwest Pacific Theater. The exception to this rule was the deployment of modern U.S. fleet submarines to the Philippine Islands in 1940. The flotilla in the Asiatic fleet constituted the largest collection of modern submarines in the U.S. Navy.¹²⁴

The production of the Allied nations had not yet caught up to the needs of the military to equip forces spread across the face of the earth. Until production generated enough new equipment to fill needs, ABDACOM would have to make do with what was on hand. The British and the Dutch were short of every kind of weapon, but their most desperate need was air power. The Dutch in Java had roughly four squadrons of pursuit aircraft, primarily Brewster Buffaloes. This aircraft was designed as the U.S. Navy's first mono-wing carrier borne fighter.

¹²⁴ Winslow. *The Fleet the Gods Forgot*, 24-25

It was a solid aircraft capable of short takeoffs, but its top speed of 190 mph meant it was far slower than Japan's A6M Zero fighter, which had a rated speed of 310 mph. There were a few modern fighters such as the P-36 Hawk and P-40 Warhawk, but they numbered less than twenty aircraft in each case.¹²⁵ The situation was the same with medium and heavy bombers.

ABDAAIR had mostly outmoded B-10 bombers that had almost no defensive armament. The few B-17 Flying Fortresses in the theater were early models with a high number of airframe hours, requiring more frequent maintenance and limiting their operational availability. At any one time in Java there were no more than ten B-17s that were mission capable.¹²⁶ British airpower in Malaya and on Sumatra was in equally bad shape.¹²⁷

Nearly the only type of aircraft that the Allies had in any numbers was the floatplanes of the Dutch Naval Air Force and the U.S. Patrol Wing 10. The PBYs under ABDACOM control played a vital role in keeping communications open throughout the entire theater. They were also indispensable in rescue and reconnaissance missions. PBY's were kept busy recovering shipwrecked sailors and gathering intelligence on Japanese naval advances. They were the last Allied craft of any kind to flee Java after the surrender of the Dutch on March 9.¹²⁸

ABDACOM fared little better when it came to naval power. The only modern warships in the Southwest Pacific, the HMS *Prince of Wales* and the HMS *Repulse*, were sunk by land based Japanese air power before ABDACOM was even formed. Their sinking destroyed the heart of British sea power in the Far East and proved that air cover was essential to protect naval

¹²⁵ Edmonds. *They Fought With What They Had*, 253

¹²⁶ Edmonds. *They Fought With What They Had*, 259-263

¹²⁷ Connell, *Wavell: Supreme Commander*, 171

¹²⁸ Roscoe Creed. . *PBY: The Catalina Flying Boat*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985) 93; Womack. *The Dutch Naval Air Force Against Japan*, 135-139

task forces in World War II. Without air cover, the cobbled together ABDA fleet, with its few modern destroyers, was helpless to slow the Japanese advance.

Allied forces suffered from inferior arms as well as equipment. Many soldiers in the theater were armed with World War I surplus rifles. The deficiency in weapons was most obvious in the case of torpedoes. Japanese “long-lance” torpedoes outperformed the American Mark XIV torpedo in every aspect. The Japanese version was oxygen propelled as opposed to the Mark XIV’s chemically induced steam propulsion meaning that the Japanese torpedo left almost no wake to be detected by its target. The long-lance was also slightly faster: a maximum speed of 49 knots versus 46 knots for the American Mark XIV. Perhaps the biggest advantage of the Japanese torpedo was its range. The American Mark XIV had a maximum range of 9,000 yards, whereas the long-lance could run for an astounding 48,000 yards.¹²⁹ Finally, the U.S.-made torpedo suffered from serious design flaws and a high failure rate. This failure rate was due in part to its complex detonating system. Mark XIV torpedoes ran ten feet deeper than they were programmed to, and they had a complicated magnetic detonator designed to explode under the keel of the target, breaking it’s back. Unfortunately, this defective detonator had the disconcerting habit of failing to explode when it reached its target.¹³⁰ Given these numerous shortcomings, it is easy to understand the consistent failure of ABDAFLOAT forces to inflict any serious damage on the Japanese.

¹²⁹ Allen Schom. *The Eagle and the Rising Sun: The Japanese American War, 1941-1943, Pearl Harbor Through Guadalcanal*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) 333; Capt. Tameichi Hara. *Japanese Destroyer Captain: Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, Midway—the Great Naval Battles as Seen Through Japanese Eyes*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1967) 29

¹³⁰ Glen Williford. *Racing the Sunrise: Reinforcing America’s Pacific Outposts, 1941-1942*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010) 224-225

Obsolete weapons are still weapons. However, ABDACOM was so under supplied that many of the ground forces arriving in the theater had no weapons, especially those men who were transferred to the theater for behind-the-line jobs, such as mechanics. Near the end of ABDACOM's short existence many of the military personnel found themselves without duties as well as arms. Having no aircraft meant that the majority of air force ground personnel were superfluous.

On February 21, in one of his last telegrams to the CCS, General Wavell outlined the military situation in Java. He determined that "fighter strength in Java [is] now reduced to less than 40...heavy bombers [10]. Obvious that above force can only hope to fight for a few days more at most."¹³¹ Wavell further outlined the condition of the rapidly disintegrating ABDA forces in Java: "There are approximately 6,000 R.A.F. and R.A.A.F. personnel unarmed and surplus to fighting units and about 1,400 Americans [in the same condition.]"¹³² General Wavell also informed the CCS that he was looking for transport to evacuate those personnel who were no longer able to contribute to the defense of Java. This was counter to the CCS's orders that Java be "defended with the utmost resolution...[as] every day gained is important."¹³³ The men on Java were ordered to fight to the bitter end with the weapons at hand. No further assistance was coming from the CCS.

ABDACOM had never been high on the priority list for Allied reinforcements after confirmation of the Germany First strategy. As the Japanese continued their unabated advance through the Southwest Pacific Theater, the CCS became less willing to commit reinforcements and material to the support of Java. At the CCS meeting on February 17, just a week before the

¹³¹ Connell. *Wavell: Supreme Commander*, 192

¹³² Connell. *Wavell: Supreme Commander*, 193

¹³³ Connell. *Wavell: Supreme Commander*, 193

ABDA command was dissolved, Sir John Dill read a telegram from General Wavell concerning the diversion of Australian troops from Java to Burma. Although Sir Dill agreed with the decision, he stated that, “The fact that no further reinforcements should be put into Java was a hard decision to take...”¹³⁴ Admiral Stark concurred with Dill, saying that the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff had come to the same conclusion: “The reinforcement of Java was not a militarily sound proposition.”¹³⁵

Even before the outbreak of war, procuring men and equipment for the Malay Barrier was complicated. By 1941 both the British and the Dutch both looked to the United States to produce the bulk of their war material. However, the British were more desperate to have material shipped to their depots in the United Kingdom and the North African Theater. The British would only resupply their Far East holdings when American equipment deliveries reached their other theaters. The Dutch, on the other hand, had no other theater in 1941 and were therefore desperate for supplies in the N.E.I. Because they were one of the smaller members of the Allied coalition, Dutch negotiators often justifiably felt left out of logistics decisions and struggled to keep their interests in the minds of Allied planners.¹³⁶

Perhaps the American officer who had the most intimate relationship with Dutch supply agents was General Henry S. Aurand. In 1941, Aurand was appointed Director of Defense Aid, the bureaucratic organization that distributed supplies to the Allied nations. As director, Aurand had the dubious duty of trying to placate Allied negotiators when supplies were not available for a particular theater. His phone logs show the constant state of dissatisfaction with the pace of supply production and distribution. Not surprisingly, every Ally thought that their needs should

¹³⁴ CCS meeting 5, minutes February 17, 1942

¹³⁵ CCS meeting 5, minutes February 17, 1942

¹³⁶ For information on Dutch weapons procurement see the papers of Henry Arnaud.

be at the top of the list. Aurand's job was to disabuse them of that notion. All Allied cargo shipping was placed in one pool for the Maritime Commission to assign based on needs that they helped determine. Shipping shortages often meant that only some components of a unit arrived in the Far East on any given transport. The CCS were aware of this problem and brought it to the attention of Pres. Roosevelt in their first memorandum to him about the situation along the Malay Barrier at the end of December 1941. In the memo's first annex the CCS discussed U.S. combat troops stationed in Australia and those in transit. Section b of the annex stated: "A pursuit group, complete as to material, including 80 planes, will leave San Diego on the KITTY HAWK about January 10. *Additional ships will be necessary for the personnel.*"¹³⁷ Although ABDACOM could look forward to a full pursuit group in Australia sometime in February, the pilots and mechanics to make it operational would be transported on another convoy. Without these necessary operators the equipment was useless.

Another example of equipment shortages in ABDACOM appeared in a February 1941 conversation General Aurand had with Major General James Henry Burns concerning the shipment of aircraft and ammunition to the N.E.I. General Burns, deputy administrator at the office of Lend-Lease said that the "Dutch are pressing awfully hard to get 72 more fighter planes," which he determined would not be a problem. Aurand then pointed out that the Dutch were looking at P-40 fighters, which had five .50 caliber machine guns as their primary offensive armament. Aurand then elaborated, "[T]hat's 360 guns – and [the Dutch will] want at least 5,000 rounds [of ammunition] per gun...that's almost two million rounds." Aurand told General Burns that while the Dutch could have the planes, it would be impossible to equip them with two

¹³⁷ CCS meeting 1, annex 1. Italics added by author.

million rounds of .50 caliber ammunition.¹³⁸ The Allies quickly realized that in a global war, production and distribution bottlenecks were immense problems. These bottlenecks had to be cleared before troops on the front lines could be adequately supplied.

Repair

The difficulty in obtaining supplies in the Southwest Pacific Theater increased the importance for ABDACOM's leaders to preserve existing materials. Unfortunately, the development of base and repair depots, or the lack thereof, had a major and detrimental effect on the maintenance of the air and sea forces available to Wavell. Lack of repair both reduced operational availability and increased replacement requirements to keep units at authorized strength.¹³⁹

Air and naval power were vital to holding the Malay Barrier. Army Air Force records that pertain to the operational life of equipment under differing conditions of overseas service offer a unique insight to the negative effects of interrupted maintenance regimens related to maintaining air power in the theater. To help understand the logistical requirements for basing air groups overseas, the Army Air Force undertook a comprehensive study of the effects combat and maintenance had on the mission-capable hours of an aircraft. In Appendix Three of *Army Air Force Historical Studies No. 9* there is a very telling set of statistics about aircraft life. Four aircraft types are listed: Pursuit aircraft (fighters such as the P-40), Light Bombardment airplanes (two engine bombers such as the Douglass A-20), Medium Bombardment airplanes (including the B-25 Mitchell and B-26 Marauder), and Heavy Bombardment airplanes (typically the B-17

¹³⁸ Henry Aurand Papers, Eisenhower library. Phone log February 6, 1941

¹³⁹ An air group in the AAF consisted of three to five squadrons. Each squadron was authorized 16 or 18 pursuit aircraft. Numbers from bombers were slightly smaller. The aircraft to be shipped on the *Kitty Hawk* comprised elements of 4 squadrons.

Flying Fortress). Each aircraft type was assessed a combat life according to where the aircraft was based and the conditions under which it operated. Combat life was the number of operational days before the aircraft required a major overhaul including engine replacement. In the case of pursuit aircraft the combat life was listed as follows. The average life of one pursuit plane, based in Australia and facing “conditions of no combat but operating on foreign soil” equaled 200 days. The same aircraft, stationed in the Darwin or Port Moresby area, at the east end of the Malay Barrier, facing “intermittent medium scale enemy attacks and fairly continuous unit operations...” had a combat life of 23 days. Under conditions of intensive combat with full-scale daily enemy attacks equivalent to conditions that existed in Java a pursuit aircraft had a combat life of only six days before needing major overhaul or replacement.¹⁴⁰ Conditions on the front, where bases were undeveloped and repair depots non-existent, shortened the operational life of pursuit aircraft by a factor of thirty-three. In addition to constant combat missions, lack of spare parts and repair depots were most responsible for this degradation of combat life in pursuit craft.

Shortened combat life was not unique to pursuit aircraft stationed in the ABDACOM area. The combat life of light bombers fell from a 273-day lifespan in non-combat areas to seven days in Java. Medium bomber airframe lifespan similarly dropped from 273 days to 23 days and for heavy bombers declined from 263 days to 23 days.¹⁴¹ These numbers made it nearly impossible to have any ABDACOM aircraft combat ready after the first month of the coalition. There were no spare parts, no replacement engines and no bases equipped to do the maintenance required along the length of the Malay Barrier. Lack of repair facilities made it impossible for

¹⁴⁰ DDE library, Mil records collection series I- USAF historical studies, box 3 appendix 3

¹⁴¹ DDE library, Mil records collection series I- USAF historical studies, box 3 appendix 3

ABDACOM to maintain even a semblance of air superiority in the face of superior numbers of enemy aircraft.

Resupply conditions were so difficult that even under non-combat conditions ABDA had difficulty keeping air groups at rated strength. Under normal non-combat conditions each pursuit group would need six replacement aircraft per month. However, the abysmal conditions in Java required an astounding 192 replacement aircraft per group, per month. In other words, it would take shipment of nearly two complete new air groups per month to maintain the strength of one group in Java. These numbers were impossible to maintain.¹⁴²

On the ground, in the air, and at sea, the Japanese overmatched the Allies in the Southwest Pacific Theater. None of the nations involved in the coalition had the resources to fully equip their forces in the Far East prior to the outbreak of war. After American entry into World War II the Allies faced a logistical problem of massive proportions, needing to ship men and material across every ocean. Long supply lines, insufficient available shipping, and lack of equipment hampered the Allies. The equipment available in the Far East at the start of the war was often obsolete. A lack of trained and experienced personnel further compromised the Allied effort to maintain defenses along the Malay Barrier. Poor base development, lack of reinforcement, and the inability to repair existing stock seriously hampered ABDACOM's mission of stopping the Japanese advance in January and February 1942.

¹⁴² DDE library, Mil records collection series I- USAF historical studies, box 3 appendix 3

CHAPTER 4 - Conclusion

From their experiences with ABDACOM, the United States and its Allies learned to identify three major area of concern when forming coalitions. Political unity, a clear linear command structure, and effective logistical organization were the key issues related to creating effective Allied coalitions. The lack of time to address any of the three major issues that bedeviled the Allied effort to hold the Malay Barrier caused ABDACOM's swift and total defeat.

Although the ABDACOM coalition failed to achieve victory, the exercise in coalition building itself was not an absolute failure. Evidence would suggest that the experience of building and maintaining the ABDA coalition gave both the general staff of the Allies and local theater command invaluable insight into the difficulties of trying to create a unified fighting force from the disparate elements of many different nations. The insight gained proved helpful to the Allies in planning and executing further coalition action.

One example of the changes that happened in later coalitions was the command latitude that General Dwight Eisenhower was given in Operation Torch, the next Allied coalition effort. He used that latitude to reduce national friction within the coalition. In a speech to the National War College in 1948, Eisenhower talked about his views on ABDACOM'S effect on future allied coalition decisions. He mentioned the initial Allied coalition and the command of General Wavell, and then he went on to say,

But there was one valuable thing which came out of the attempt. In Washington the representatives of the British Chiefs of Staff and the American staffs attempted to write a charter for an allied commander. We were not yet experienced, and therefore we thought everything had to be reduced to writing. One of our great problems was what to do about the

matter of administration, and particularly about administration as it applies to supply. Each nation was going to be responsible for supplying its own forces, and therefore we felt there had to be clear, independent authority residing in nationalistic command.¹⁴³

Eisenhower could see that national issues could be a problem for the theater commander. In his opinion, all further coalitions needed to mitigate national friction in the combat theaters:

That meant that within that body any question of British versus American interests had to be settled, and having been settled there, the first problem was to keep any of the differences from percolating on down to the field command. Therefore the decision was instantly taken to have no staff in which we would have a British part here and an American part there - nothing based on nationalistic lines.¹⁴⁴

This speech is an implicit admission that the CCS and Allied planners took to heart the mistakes that had been made in the planning for ABDACOM and worked to assure they did not recur.

No other combined effort in World War II took place under the same conditions as ABDA, but most benefited from improved political partnership, streamlined command structures, and effective logistics organizations. Each of the factors involved in coalition building was important in its own right, but no one issue contained the magic bullet of coalition success. All of these issues had to be addressed to create an international coalition that could achieve victory.

Political Unity

Creation of a strong coalition while limiting complications from conflicting national concerns was the strategic goal of the United States. This problem was exacerbated because

¹⁴³ D.D. Eisenhower Speech to the National War College, June 19, 1948.
<http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/pages.php?pid=186> (Accessed 5-15-2012)

¹⁴⁴ D.D. Eisenhower Speech to the National War College, June 19, 1948.
<http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/pages.php?pid=186> (Accessed 5-15-2012)

Allied defenses in the Pacific were as much determined by political needs as by military strategic importance. The United States was determined to maintain its interests in Asia by planning for and maintaining defensive positions in areas like the Philippine Islands. The American outposts in the Pacific were poorly located from a strategic standpoint, but maintaining them sent a clear message to other Pacific powers that the United States was willing to fight for its interests.¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately, the distance of the American bases in the Pacific from the centers of U.S. policy making and the limitations imposed by the Washington Treaty System meant that the were often accorded lower priority for supply and development funding. Some authors have shown that the majority of American war planning related to the Pacific theater was as much related to the maintenance of budgetary levels as it was to realistic assessments of the ability of the United States to hold and defend a particular set of island bases.¹⁴⁶ The underlying political and budgetary issues meant that after the declaration of war the United States had to try and defend positions that were untenable. The formation of ABDACOM was a valiant attempt to preserve the political bonds that America had developed in the Pacific. Even ABDA Supreme Commander Sir Archibald Wavell understood that the decision to hold the Malay Barrier was as much political as strategic. General Wavell compared the Allied coalition's attempt to hold in the N.E.I. to the earlier British attempt to reinforce Greece in the face of Axis advances. In his report to the CCS concerning the operations of ABDA, he wrote "Our assistance to Greece cost us Crete and placed us in great difficulties in the Mediterranean; our attempt to hold the N.E.I

¹⁴⁵ Leutze. *A Different Kind of Victory*, 15

¹⁴⁶ Leutze. *A Different Kind of Victory*, 157

has cost us Burma and has placed India and Ceylon in danger; but that in both instances *we took the right, the only, decision* I have no doubt.”¹⁴⁷

At the Arcadia meetings America and Britain quickly determined the basic strategy for ABDACOM: impede the Japanese advance, hold the Malay Barrier, and wait for reinforcement before taking the offensive. This defensive strategy bowed to the political and geographic realities of the theater. The Allies did not have the capability of offensive action in the Pacific in 1941 and early 1942. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were not overly confident that the Arcadia plans were practical, but they provided a simple foundation for the Allies to build upon when organizing additional coalitions.¹⁴⁸

When the United States entered World War II and started holding direct planning meetings with the British, the creation of ABDACOM was the first coalition venture that consumed their time. The CCS knew the extreme difficulty ABDACOM faced in order to succeed, given the lack of men and material available in the theater. However, the CCS did use the formation of ABDACOM to set a precedent for overall coalition doctrine among the Allies.¹⁴⁹ One of these precedents included the concept of strategic control by the CCS to mitigate the effect of national objectives on coalition goals. Although there was a council of political representatives from the nations participating in the Pacific coalition, the CCS retained control of military decisions in the theater.¹⁵⁰

Ironically, one of the odd political outcomes of ABDACOM’s destruction was that while the United States engaged in coalition action throughout World War II, the Pacific Theater

¹⁴⁷ Wavell. *Despatch by the Supreme Commander*, 17-18 (italics added by author)

¹⁴⁸ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 24

¹⁴⁹ Spector. *The Eagle against the Sun*, 128

¹⁵⁰ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 94

effectively became an American lake. After the collapse of ABDACOM the United States military strategically dominated action in the Pacific theater of war. Both Britain and Holland were reduced to peripheral roles for the rest of the war in the Southwest Pacific. Australia, due to its location and accessibility, was turned into a large rear echelon supply and training base, and most of its troops remained committed to the fight in other British theaters. Though the ABDA nations still contributed to Allied victory over Japan, it was the United States that directed strategy and engaged in the bulk of the fighting after March 1942. The United States' domination of the Pacific theater was formalized in a CCS directive dated March 31, 1942, which stated, "[T]he Pacific Theater...is designated an area of United States strategic responsibility."¹⁵¹ When the United States assumed overall responsibility, the command problems found in coalitions were mitigated due to the dominant nature of U.S. control.¹⁵² Records also show the authority of the supreme commanders assigned to the Pacific was less restricted by the coalition's political infighting after the United States took over command of the theater.¹⁵³

Command Clarity

Once the Arcadia conference decided on a common strategy, the next issue facing the Allies was coalition command. The British wanted to decide reinforcement issues and defer coalition command issues until they were assured of sufficient strength in the Pacific to hold Singapore. There were also political issues that created problems in deciding on the choice of Supreme Commander for ABDA. Deferring the choice until the supply issues were solved

¹⁵¹ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 100

¹⁵² There were still conflicts among U.S. Commanders, most notably General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz who were given command of the Southern Theater and Central Theater respectively. They constantly bickered about allotment of resources and overall strategy for defeating the Japanese.

¹⁵³ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 100-101

would have given the British time to assess the choice of commander. Meanwhile, the U.S. delegation, led by General Marshall, looked to lessons learned from World War I and insisted that the Arcadia conference answer the questions regarding command before deciding the reinforcement issue. General Marshall was the strongest and loudest proponent of the idea of unified command in any coalition involving American participation.¹⁵⁴

General Marshall prevailed when the British acquiesced to the appointment of General Wavell as Supreme Commander of ABDACOM. However, General Wavell was hobbled with such a complex command structure that his ability to respond quickly to the evolving situation in the Southwest Pacific Theater was compromised. General Wavell faced five Japanese lines of advance and had little time to reorient his thinly spread forces to meet any one of the threats. He made a valiant effort to slow the enemy advance, but was constantly reacting to Japanese movement and unable to gain the time needed to take the initiative.¹⁵⁵

General Wavell also clearly pointed out the strategic problems that helped to doom his command, primarily his lack of air power and the effect this had on naval and ground operations. In his *Despatch* he states, “Air was a vital factor on both sides. Without air superiority our Naval Forces, even had they been stronger, could have accomplished little, as the danger of operating warships within range of shore-based aircraft without fighter cover was shown on several occasions during the short campaign.”¹⁵⁶ General Wavell learned early that fighter cover was the new key to naval victory in World War II.

ABDACOM was the first Allied attempt to put into practice the command structure required for successful coalition warfare. The Southwest Pacific Theater was the crucible that

¹⁵⁴ Hayes. *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 50

¹⁵⁵ Wavell. *Despatch by the Supreme Commander*, 16

¹⁵⁶ Wavell. *Despatch by the Supreme Commander*, 16

showed the difficulty involved in creating a unified fighting machine from a collection of international forces. Communications, operational planning, and inter-service coordination were all problems in the six weeks that General Wavell commanded ABDA, and he noted these problems in his final report to the CCS. The planning staffs in Washington and London noted the difficulties in organizational planning and were charged with creating solutions in later campaigns. Within six months, as the Allies began taking the offensive in both Europe and the Pacific, these command and supply problems had been largely addressed.¹⁵⁷

Logistics

Coalition warfare is a difficult endeavor under the best of conditions, and conditions in the Southwest Pacific Theater were far from ideal. The Japanese held every advantage: a position to expand from a central location, forces equipped with modern weapons, and a highly-trained and experienced military led by experienced commanders with clear operational goals. ABDACOM forces, on the other hand, were often a hastily organized mélange of native and colonial troops armed with obsolete weapons and suffering from a lack of effective leadership and a lack of common doctrine.

ABDACOM's defeat showed that forces with no common doctrine or training could not function as a unified whole without sufficient time for the leaders to create bonds across national lines. Coalitions needed to agree on communications and supply requirements, but most importantly, their members needed to understand coalition objectives and the logistic requirements they entailed. If a coalition member promoted national objectives over those of the coalition, the military effectiveness of all the coalition's forces would be further degraded. The

¹⁵⁷ D.D. Eisenhower Speech to the National War College, June 19, 1948.
<http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/pages.php?pid=186> (Accessed 5-15-2012)

countries that were a part of ABDACOM often struggled with subordinating their own national objectives to the overall strategic objectives of the coalition. Allied problems had time to appear in ABDA, but the problems did not have time to fester or cause any serious harm to the overall Allied partnership in World War II. The short life of the coalition gave planners in Washington, D.C. and London time to sort out potential conflicts between the Allies.

Logistical problems must be solved for any coalition to have even a remote chance of success. Bases must be properly sited and developed to provide a defense in depth and to allow for a steady, well-supported advance in the proper conditions. The Malay Barrier had no shortage of bases, but they were of necessity strung along the East/West axis of the island archipelago, creating a long but shallow line of defense. Add to that the fact that most of the bases were underdeveloped and poorly defended, and it becomes clear that there was little chance of garrisoning the entire line.¹⁵⁸ Getting material to the combat theater in a timely manner is of utmost importance.

Access to repair depots is as vital as proper supply. The men of ABDACOM made heroic efforts to keep the small number of aircraft and ships they possessed in combat-ready condition. However, the loss of a majority of the spare parts inventory with the fall of Manila, and the lack of proper facilities along the Malay Barrier meant that when ABDACOM was able to procure new equipment it was quickly lost, in part due to lack of proper maintenance. Additionally, the Allies had little in the way of available troops and resources to send to the theater. Even when ships managed to get to the theater they were often improperly loaded. General Wavell mentions that problem in his summary of events: "For instance, the personnel of a machine gun battalion arrived in Java and might have been invaluable but that their machine

¹⁵⁸ Wavell. *Despatch by the Supreme Commander*, 4

guns and equipment were in another ship due many days later.”¹⁵⁹ That is a particularly glaring example of the logistics and transport problems that ABDACOM faced, and highlights the fact that no coalition can hope to hold on for more than a few days or weeks without proper logistical support.

The Final Movement

In many ways ABDACOM was similar to a terminally ill patient who dies from a series of failures that happen so quickly that the doctors have no chance to solve any one of the problems. Time was the only thing that might have saved ABDACOM. Time to build more ships, more planes, train and equip more troops, and time to work out more effective command arrangements. Given enough time it is possible, though not probable, that some of the problems facing ABDA might have been solved. The political realities that forced the United States and its Allies to defend a poorly developed and positioned area would still remain. The problems of command might have been mitigated given days or weeks more to organize. Reinforcement and repair problems would have benefited from extra time as well, though it is highly doubtful that the coalition could have held off the Japanese advance for any length of time unless they received a huge influx of aircraft.

What cannot be stated with any certainty is that, if time had allowed ABDA to solve one or more of the problems that limited its ability to act effectively, the solution would have stopped the Japanese advance. The problems were so numerous and so serious that in all likelihood any one solution would have been undone by the remaining problems. Extending the life of the

¹⁵⁹ Wavell. *Despatch by the Supreme Commander*, 17

coalition by a few days or even weeks was not enough to assure that the Malay Barrier would stand.

Time, though, was the one thing that ABDACOM did not control. Until the Battle of Midway in June of 1942 the enemy dictated events on the field of combat. The Japanese decided where and when they would attack, forcing the Allies to react and retreat. In ABDACOM, the Allies ran out of room before the Japanese ran out of time. The surrender of Java on March 9, 1942 ended the short, pained existence of ABDACOM. The Japanese, with their homogenous modern military machine, destroyed ABDACOM before the awesome power of the Allies could be bought to bear and before America's "Arsenal of Democracy" could expand production to arm that power. ABDACOM's failure did not lead to Japanese victory. It was, however, the darkest hour of the Allied coalition in the theater. Though it is unlikely that any possible effort could have prevented the collapse of ABDACOM, the CCS recognized the problems that doomed America's first coalition in World War II, and great effort was expended to find solutions before further coalition actions were fought. International coalitions can be effective, but they will always retain the problems that beset ABDACOM. The issue becomes one of how a commander mitigates those problems. Dwight Eisenhower was the general who became the master of coalition building. His method was as simple as it was difficult:

"You should not try to change ideas and concepts on the part of some subordinate of a different nationality because you disagree with him. If you can achieve the great over-all unity of purpose that inspires loyalty, inspires teamwork, never bother your heads about minor things in seeking perfection because too many difficulties can arise out of minor irritations and frustrations."¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ D.D. Eisenhower Speech to the National War College, June 19, 1948.
<http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/pages.php?pid=186> (Accessed 5-15-2012)

Conflicts in doctrine and organization cannot be overlooked lest they lead to defeat. But competent leadership can minimize the problems caused by those issues and give a coalition the time and material for ultimate victory.

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Appendix A - ABDACOM Organization

Theater command (ABDACOM)

General Sir Archibald Wavell, British Army (BA) – Supreme Commander

Lieutenant General George H. Brett, US Army Air Corps (USAAC) — Deputy Commander

Lt General Henry Royds Pownall (BA) — Chief of Staff

Land forces (ABDALAND)

Lt General Hein Ter Poorten, Royal Netherlands Army — commander of land forces (ABDA Land); also in direct command of Dutch East Indies land forces

Major General Ian Playfair (BA) — deputy land commander and chief of staff, land forces

Maj. General Thomas Jacomb Hutton (BA) — Burma Command

Maj. General David Blake, Australian Army, Australian 7th Military District (Northern Australia)

Lt General Arthur Percival (BA) — Malaya Command

General Douglas MacArthur, U.S. Army — Philippines command

Air forces (ABDAAIR)

Air Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, (RAF), commander of allied air forces.

Maj. General Lewis H Brereton (USAAC), deputy commander, allied air forces.

Naval forces (ABDAFLOAT)

Admiral Thomas C. Hart, US Navy (USN) commander of naval forces. Relieved Feb. 12, 1942.

Admiral Conrad Helfrich, Royal Netherlands Navy (RNN) Appointed Feb. 12.

Rear Admiral Arthur Palliser, Royal Navy, deputy commander naval forces.

Rear Admiral William A. Glassford, Jr. (USN) commander, U.S. naval forces.

Rear Admiral Johan van Staveren (RNN) commander, Dutch naval forces.