

Resurrecting the Kimmel Case

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All photos courtesy of M. Kimmel, IV

Based on recent evidence and testimony, Senator Strom Thurmond (center) has called for an expeditious reevaluation of command performance at Pearl Harbor by (from far left) Navy General Counsel Stephen Honigman, Secretary of the Navy John Dalton, and former Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch.

Not many controversies in naval history have cut so sharply – and so deeply – as the question of U.S. command accountability for the practically total surprise achieved by the Japanese in their 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. It is a familiar, sometimes nagging, story to historians and students of this country's naval past, who generally come down on one side or the other. They are either in favor of or against restoring rank and thus respect to Husband Kimmel and Walter Short, the two men who, because they were the officers in charge on that infamous 7 December, were summarily demoted, relieved of command, and retired in disgrace. Middle ground on this issue is thin, indeed.

Recently, a united front has renewed the fight to restore rank to the Pearl Harbor commanders posthumously. And now, the Department of Defense and the Department of the Navy have been charged with drafting a new recommendation, based on the latest information and the testimony or support of 37 retired flag officers – among them, two former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, four former Chiefs of Naval Operations, 28 other four-star Admirals, three Vice Admirals, and one Rear Admiral. Add to that a recent letter of support from former Secretary of the Navy James Webb, and the result is a rather high-powered naval fraternity.

Detractors contend that Kimmel and Short were guilty of negligence; two leaders in such high positions as Commander-in-Chief of U.S. and Pacific Fleets and Commanding General, Hawaiian Department, respectively, must have known something was afoot and should have been better prepared, they say. If not particularly negligent themselves, then, the fact remains that the surprise attack did happen on their watch. And after all, many a commanding officer in military history has taken a fall for lesser action – or inaction, as it were.

Supporters of Kimmel and Short claim that their respective commands were surprised largely because crucial patrol aircraft they had been promised – and which would have been required for thorough, 360 air surveillance – had been relegated to the Atlantic. The most extreme among them also say that the surprise that Sunday morning was for expediency's sake; they claim that the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought a means to enter the war against Nazi Germany, and, so their logic goes, determined that an attack from Japan on the largest U.S. military base in the region would rally the support of the American public to retaliate in both the European and Pacific theaters. And rightly so, they say, for such support was necessary to carry out a truly world war. But the Kimmel family says the charade has gone on much too long. In defense of his grandfather, Manning Kimmel, IV, testified recently to military and government officials in Washington that “At no time has the military shown any genuine interest in finding the truth. Instead, you have perpetuated the largest coverup in U.S. history.”

Now, supporters of Kimmel and Short ask, is it not time to concede that vital intelligence – which should have been relayed to Pearl Harbor – reposed dormant in Washington (regardless of whether this was politically motivated or simply the product of bureaucratic bungling), and that the commanders in Hawaii had indeed been made scapegoats, possibly for the larger good of

the nation – even the world?

These are admittedly simplified encapsulations of each stand on this controversy. Its many facets and plausible scenarios have been much more thoroughly articulated elsewhere by authors and historians who have spent years piecing together various versions of the story through the use of primary source material. This report makes no pretense of any great revelation concerning what has become known as The Kimmel Case. Most intriguing now, however, is the cast of characters collectively calling for a reevaluation.

The principal force behind the campaign for a complete exoneration of Kimmel and Short – aside from impassioned and tireless pleas since 1987 from Kimmel’s two surviving sons, Edward and Thomas, and other Kimmel descendants – is Captain Edward L. Beach, highly decorated naval officer, naval aide to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, record-setting submariner, and best-selling author. Joining him from the historical and literary ranks are Briton John Costello and Michael Gannon.

Costello is the author of several books, the latest being *Days of Infamy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), which most notably draws attention to General Douglas MacArthur’s own lack of preparation, despite early warnings, for the equally disastrous Japanese attack on the Philippines, hours after Pearl Harbor. Gannon is a Professor of History at the University of Florida best known for *Operation Drumbeat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1992), his acclaimed book about the German U-boat campaign just off the East Coast of the United States in 1942. Most pertinent here, however, is his article in the December 1994 issue of the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*.

There, he attacks then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King – who negated the positive findings of the 1944 Naval Court of Inquiry and charged Kimmel with “dereliction” – and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal – who cited the absence of long-range aerial reconnaissance around Oahu as Kimmel’s “most grievous failure.”

According to Gannon:

For a complete sweep on a 360° arc to the maximum range of scout planes, 84 aircraft would be required on a single flight of 16 hours. Since the same planes and crews could not make such a flight every day, the Navy required a fleet of 250 operational aircraft if it hoped to

conduct effective reconnaissance over a protracted period. [Rear] Admiral [Claude C.] Bloch, [Commandant, 14th Naval District]...had only 49 patrol aircraft for this purpose in the first week of December... , most of which were being used for training in anticipation of offensive combat assignments stipulated in War Plan Pac-46, which included, within 13 days after the start of the war, a raid by surface and air striking forces against Japanese bases in the Marshall Islands...

Upon reading an early draft of Gannon's article, former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Carlisle A. H. Trost wrote a letter to current Secretary of the Navy John H. Dalton, urging that the Kimmel Case be reopened. Referring to his own endorsement of a 1988 official recommendation against Kimmel, Trost wrote, in part, "No mistake should be allowed to stand in this sensitive matter, and I personally disavow my unwitting support of one."

On the heels of the *Proceedings* article, the National Archives hosted a program in December 1994 intended to air these latest findings and interpretations. Before a nearly full auditorium, Beach led both Gannon and Costello through their respective testimonies, Costello with his MacArthur comparison and contrast and Gannon on aerial reconnaissance. The response from the decidedly pro-Kimmel assembly was enthusiastic and inquisitive concerning what the next step was to be. Beach acknowledged the necessity of congressional participation and action and set out on his own Capitol Hill crusade.



Among those testifying before Senator Thurmond's April hearing were, at left, historians Michael Gannon, John Costello, and Captain Edward Beach. Below, listening to the historians before making their own presentations were, from left: Admiral Thomas Moorer, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Kimmel family members – grandson Thomas, Jr., sons Thomas, Sr.,

and Edward, and grandson Manning, IV – and counsel to Kimmel in 1944, Edward Hanify.



His new book, *Scapegoats* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), passionately addresses the controversy and served as the basis for what the U.S. Naval Institute termed a “Rump Session” at its Annual Meeting and Annapolis Seminar in April 1995. To another gathering of obviously interested and mostly sympathetic parties, Beach pleaded the Kimmel case, citing the allegations made against the Pearl Harbor commanders and countering them with his interpretations of the evidence at hand.

“I asked for this meeting,” he established at the outset. “I am not here to sell a book.” From that point, Beach proceeded to outline the circumstances that led to the Japanese attack, including a crash course in how the Magic decoding efforts in Washington were intercepting and deciphering Japanese diplomatic and military messages. He also set the scenes in both Washington and Hawaii – and verbally painted rather unseemly behavioral portraits of several key players – all of which combined to spell disaster at Pearl Harbor. In perhaps his most provocative opinion, he doubts that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall, and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Stark – given all the warnings they had received, decoded and otherwise – ignored an impending attack on the night of 6 December and instead slept comfortably all night in their Washington beds. “Stark was called, but forgot. Nobody called Marshall. And everybody went to bed not expecting anything to happen,” said Beach. “Well, if you believe that, you’re as nutty as the next fellow.”

To the charge that Kimmel and therefore the Navy was not prepared for the Japanese attack, Beach contended that, “The Navy was ready. The drills that Admiral Kimmel had been conducting were quite severe.” Antiaircraft

drills were common, and after all, said Beach, “The Japanese themselves commented on how rapidly we had responded. . . So I don’t think there is any valid criticism of Admiral Kimmel for not having been at battle stations that morning. He got to battle stations pretty damned fast for a Sunday morning in peacetime.”

The solution to this injustice is simple, said Beach in an emotional conclusion. “The family is asking for only one thing – restoration of ranks for Admiral Kimmel and General Short. All it means is that the government admits that these men were wrongly treated. In effect, it would be a national apology. And it has to be done publicly, with plenty of notice so that everybody in the country knows it. It won’t help General Short or Admiral Kimmel, who died in 1949 and 1968, respectively. But in addition to the Kimmel family’s honor, I am thinking of my own honor, of the Navy’s honor, and of the nation’s honor. And that is why I wrote the book.” As Kai Bird wrote in a recent review of *Scapegoats*, Beach is “a man not easily ignored.” (*The Washington Post* “Book World,” 21 May 1995, p. 3)

The very next day, 27 April 1995, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) convened a Capitol Hill hearing on the Kimmel Case. Among those who testified were: historians Beach, Costello, and Gannon; Edward B. Hanify, legal counsel to Admiral Kimmel in 1944; Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Admiral James L. Holloway, III, former Chief of Naval Operations; retired Admiral Harold E. Shear; retired Rear Admiral Donald M. Showers; 7th District Director of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, Anthony DeLorenzo (who called for a positive resolution to this issue by the 55th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1996); and Admiral Kimmel’s sons, Edward and Thomas, and grandsons Manning, IV, and Thomas, Jr. In the absence of descendants of General Short, the Kimmel family stated readily that the action they are seeking goes for both commanders.

Accompanying then-Deputy Secretary of Defense John M. Deutch and Secretary of the Navy Dalton into the committee conference room was General Counsel of the Navy Steven S. Honigman, who presented the official Department of Defense and Department of the Navy positions on this case. “The historical record,” he said, “does not establish convincingly that President Roosevelt [and his subordinates] . . . deliberately withheld information from Admiral Kimmel and General Short as part of a plan for a conspiracy to expose Pearl Harbor to an attack to thrust America into a war.” He went

on to state that both Kimmel and Short were “responsible for failures in Hawaii that contributed to the unreadiness of the forces under their command to detect and defend against the Japanese attack. Those failures were detailed in the 1946 report issued by the Joint Congressional Committee at the conclusion of its extensive hearings and investigation.”

Honigman also addressed the allegation that the Pearl Harbor commanders had been treated unfairly, noting that “Admiral Kimmel enjoyed due process before that committee, he was represented by counsel, he testified at length, and he had the right to call and question witnesses.” Even though he acknowledged that the committee report to which he referred “specified that Admiral Kimmel and General Short were not guilty of dereliction of duty,” Honigman emphasized that “it did find that they made numerous errors of judgment. The most significant was dependence upon an inadequate system of command by mutual cooperation that was, in the committee’s words, ‘the conduct of operations in a state of joint oblivion.’ ” Thus, both commanders failed to coordinate their assets “for defense in the crucial days between 27 November and 7 December 1941,” Honigman said.

For the next two hours, Kimmel supporters challenged the Department of Defense and the Navy on all charges against the Pearl Harbor commanders and pleaded that the U.S. government “have the courage to admit a mistake and to right the wrong that has been done.” The distinguished retired naval officers present bolstered the case, with personal tributes to the Pearl Harbor commanders and strong contentions that neither commander “enjoyed due process” at all.

Perhaps the most compelling testimony of the day came from Edward Hanify, who sat at Admiral Kimmel’s side as counsel during the difficult summer of 1944. To Hanify, the worst crime against Admiral Kimmel was that he was denied the chance to defend himself in a court martial and that the Navy he served so well was completely indifferent to the burden he was forced to bear for the rest of his life. In closing, Hanify implored, “I hope, because we are all reaching the sunset of our lives, that before the sun sets, the Navy and the Department of Defense will see the opportunity to recommend to the President remedial justice in this case.”

From this special hearing, Secretaries Deutch and Dalton and Counsel Honigman took with them a charge from Senator Thurmond that a reevaluation of the Kimmel Case be done with no preconceptions and as expedi-

tiously as possible. The mere fact that Senator Thurmond granted such a hearing should expedite the process.¹ But if Pentagon officialdom delivers what the Kimmels consider to be the wrong answer, even if “the sun sets” on the Kimmel sons before their justice is done, rest assured that all the family members – and those supporting them – will never give up their fight.

¹In a 10 May letter to Senator Thurmond, now CIA Director Deutch assured that Mr. Honigman will lead a reexamination of the case consisting of three parts: “First, we will thoroughly review the record of our [27 April 1995] meeting, which provides excellent statements of the reasons relied upon by Rear Admiral Kimmel’s family and other proponents for seeking his promotion. Second, we will ask the *Proceedings* of the U.S. Naval Institute, the premier professional journal for naval affairs, to publish an article outlining the reasoning we articulated at the meeting for retaining Rear Admiral Kimmel’s current rank. We will use the article to invite a public dialogue among historians, students of naval affairs and persons who have served with the Navy... Finally, we will conduct another intensive review of the original official record, including the Navy Court of Inquiry and the Congressional hearings and report.” As of this writing, no such contact has been made with the Naval Institute’s editorial offices.