

A Pearl Harbor Secret

Contributed by Admin
Tuesday, 21 October 2008
Last Updated Tuesday, 21 October 2008

Pearl Harbor Naval Base in Hawaii is a pretty well known tourist destination, particularly by those old enough to remember WWII. The Bowfin submarine museum and the boat ride to the Arizona Memorial are standard stops after the Visitor Center museum. And arrangements can be made for those visits at any hotel in Honolulu. Even a side trip around to Ford Island, to the battleship Missouri, and the new Pacific Aviation Museum has become a regular part of the Pearl Harbor circuit.

But one of Ford Island's secrets will not be accessible. It remains hidden in the memories of those who served in SIPU.

The Special Intelligence Production Unit was the sort of secret that was allowed in a more stealthy era and is still employed by arrogant politicians and willful military.

We enlisted men didn't know why we were ordered to Ford Island, a naval air station. None of our training was aircraft related. But, we were not in the 'need to know' category. Even with our red, rubber stamp TOP SECRET clearance, we didn't know what secrets we were to keep, yet.

It all became clear on that March day in 1952 when our Commanding Officer, the aging Commander de B. (is his name still classified?) informed us that we were to prepare targets for U. S. aircraft carrier pilots.

The targets were in China. In preparation for its invasion.

Throughout the preceding year the Korean War had yo-yoed up and down that peninsula and the American commanding general, Douglas MacArthur, had loudly recommended, then openly threatened, to invade China. His secret decision to cross the Yalu River without political or Joint Chiefs of Staff permission, had already prompted the Commander of Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) to put wheels in motion for just such an eventuality.

The slowness to reverse his orders for those preparations resulted in the establishment of SIPU six months after MacArthur's firing by President Harry S. Truman. Hence the oxymoron: military intelligence?

Or maybe, the military high command sensing the possibility of a Republican President in 1953, and a consequent change in foreign policy, merely allowed the turning wheels to continue to turn.

In any case, a dozen officers and as many enlisted men busied themselves with WWII 14th Air Corps, aerial photography of Manchuria--that portion of eastern China that had been held by Japan since the '30s.

Our responsibility was to aid in a land invasion and since no carrier task groups could venture very far north into the Yellow Sea along Korea's west coast, our area of concern was the narrow strip of territory west of the Yalu River border. Narrow because it had to be reachable by planes from carriers on the east of the peninsula in the Sea of Japan.

The photo interpreters poured over the old stereo prints, pretty confident that little had changed in that remote area in the half dozen years since the end of WWII. Bridges were still there, both rail and highway ones.

Railroad marshalling yards still bundled tracks alongside the main lines, old Japanese military camps were now new Chinese military camps, and tall industrial smoke stacks still cast their long betraying shadows.

Our in-house pilots received the photos, targets now clearly inked with bold borders. After affixing the photos to a prepared format, they added longitude and latitude coordinates, recommended directional approaches for attacking planes, and assigned weaponry depending on the target's material and construction. Several hundred copies were printed, three hole punched and mounted into stiff-backed 'gazetteers'. They were ready for shipment to the carriers.

February 1953 did see the inauguration of a Republican president. His name was Dwight 'Ike' Eisenhower and the very idea of a land war in Asia shook that veteran campaigner to the bone.

I suspect that our gazetteers wound up in incinerators aboard the carriers.

By the time I left the Navy in the fall of 1955 the rigors of the Korean War and the reality of fighting a Chinese army had cooled most of the talk that had engendered SIPU's creation and its continued existence. Some time that year the name was changed to Fleet Intelligence Unit. I'm told that the personnel still aboard were later integrated into existing Intel units at CINCPAC.

A tourist bus can be caught to Ford Island. It will take you to the Missouri and on to the Pacific Aviation Museum--both exciting stops.

But, you will find no trace of SIPU. The beer garden and swimming pool of that era are gone. The building that housed our secrets has been replaced by what an old bos'n mate would call a geedunk dive-a snack bar. And you can access it only if you are military: active, reserve or retired.

But not to worry. There would have been nothing there but memories of those of us who performed dutifully in what might have been another difficult war.

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