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Code buster to get medal 45 years late

By Bill Gertz
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A Navy intelligence officer based in Pearl Harbor during Japan's sneak attack on Dec. 7, 1941, will be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal next month, nearly 45 years after he succeeded in breaking Japanese military codes that lead to a U.S. victory in the Battle of Midway.

The Pentagon announced last month that the posthumous award will be granted to Cmdr. Joseph J. Rochefort, who earlier had been blamed for the intelligence failure that led to the Pearl Harbor disaster.

Cmdr. Rochefort was granted the award after new details about his work were revealed in a book by the former fleet intelligence officer at Pearl Harbor, the late Rear Adm. Edwin T. Layton, and two other historians, retired Navy Capt. Roger Pineau and John Costello.

Their book, "And I Was There," published Saturday, charges that the Navy Department in Washington had intercepted vital cables from Japanese embassies and other sources that, had they been properly analyzed, would have shown that the Japanese were preparing to attack Pearl Harbor.

But the information was not relayed to Cmdr. Rochefort in Adm. Layton's fleet intelligence section until after the bombing raid that killed 2,335 men and left a large

number of Navy ships at the bottom of Pearl Harbor.

Working from close to a million secret documents declassified in 1981 and 1982, the authors examine the controversy surrounding the Navy intelligence failure prior to Pearl Harbor and through the war.

The problem still exists today, and their purpose in exposing it, the authors say, is to prevent a "nuclear Pearl Harbor."

Cmdr. Rochefort, who died in 1962, was denied the Distinguished Service Medal recommended in 1942 by the Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. Chester W. Nimitz. Adm. Nimitz had recommended the medal for Cmdr. Rochefort after he helped provide vital intelligence on Japanese military intentions during the Battle of Midway, six months after Pearl Harbor.

That same year, a presidential commission placed the blame for the unpreparedness of U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor on the commanding officers, Adm. Husband Kimmel and Army Gen. Walter C. Short.

But Adm. Layton's book charges that the two men were "scapegoats" for incompetence at senior levels of the Navy and War departments.

Using declassified documents and Adm. Layton's personal recollections, it shows that the Navy's top commanders in Washington, notably Chief of War Preparations Adm. Richmond K. "Terrible" Turner, kept a "stranglehold" on intelligence data

that could have prevented the Pearl Harbor disaster.

Among the intelligence materials were detailed diplomatic cables between the Japanese consul in Hawaii, Nagao Kita, and the government in Tokyo.

"These were vital clues of an impending air attack on the Pacific Fleet," the authors say.

Adm. Layton, who died last year at 81, said that Pacific Fleet intelligence was denied access to certain decoding keys Washington had obtained and therefore was unable to decode its own copies of the coded messages to Tokyo about ship movements toward Pearl Harbor.

Had the information been available, Adm. Layton said, Adm. Kimmel could have ordered the fleet to leave port, a move that could have minimized the loss of ships and lives.

"The terrible irony of the Kita messages is this: The cryptanalysts [in Washington] . . . had no trouble reading the Japanese J-19 or PA-K2 [codes]," the authors say. "But the consular ciphers had a low priority, and although several had been broken out that week, none was relayed to Pacific Fleet headquarters."

The cables reveal that the Japanese were receiving reports two times a day on ship movements at Pearl Harbor. On the Thursday before the attack, Washington had decoded a message from Tokyo requesting data "when there are no movements," the book says.

"This was the one that was the real giveaway," the authors say. "But apparently no one in the Navy Department stopped to reflect why Japanese naval intelligence was as interested in knowing what warships were actually in Pearl Harbor as they were in those that put to sea."