

A Voice in the Wilderness

A Contrary Japanese Army Intelligence Officer (U)

Stephen Mercado

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Few figures in intelligence history are more compelling than military officers who, making assessments that contradict policy or the dominant analytic line, remain true to their convictions. Nowhere are the stakes so high in intelligence as in military policy, which can lead a nation to glory or ruin. In this light, military officers who resist the pressure to play as a member of the team and stick to their convictions are particularly inspiring when proved right by subsequent events. In the modern history of Imperial Japan, Lt. Gen. Tatsumi Eiichi¹ is such a figure. A military expert on Great Britain and the United States, Tatsumi persisted, in the face of overwhelming pro-Axis sentiment in the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA), in arguing against Japan's embrace of Germany and Italy in the years before Japan's entry into World War II.

Career History

Tatsumi was born in 1895 in Kyushu's Saga Prefecture. In 1915, he received his commission as an infantry officer after graduating from the Imperial Military Academy.

While he ultimately led troops in the field, assuming command of the 33rd Division in China in March 1945, Tatsumi spent most of his career in the Army as an intelligence officer.

After graduating with honors from the Army War College in November 1925, Tatsumi spent his postgraduate year in England. He returned to London in September 1930, where he served until January 1933 as

assistant military attaché under Lt. Col. Homma Masaharu. After serving concurrently as a Kwangtung Army staff officer and assistant military attaché at the Japanese Embassy in the puppet state of Manchukuo, Tatsumi returned to Japan in March 1934 to work for over a year in 6th Section (Europe and America) of the Army General Staff's (AGS) 2nd Bureau (Intelligence). Tatsumi then returned to London in August 1936 as military attaché. On his return to Tokyo in mid-1938, he took charge of 6th Section. Tatsumi assumed his last post before Japan's war against Great Britain and the United States in December 1939, when he returned to London for a second tour as military attaché.²

The succession of posts Tatsumi held highlights his experience as an intelligence officer and his expertise in "Anglo" affairs (the Japanese used the word Anglo to refer to both Great Britain and the United States). He worked either in Japan's London Embassy or 2nd Bureau's 6th Section for roughly 10 years of his 30-year Army career. Almost none of his colleagues had accumulated such experience.

The German Connection

Tatsumi was also one of a few Anglo experts in an Army built under German influence to fight the Russians and Chinese. The Army had taken Germany as its model as early as the late 19th century. The IJA's "Prussian" faction had shown its ascendancy, for example, as early as 1885 by appointing Maj. Jacob

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Meckel, an experienced member of the Prussian Staff College, an Army War College lecturer and military adviser.³ Before the outbreak of war with China in 1937, the IJA's elite War College graduates could choose an overseas assignment; they typically chose Germany, the Soviet Union, or China, where they would hone their area expertise and language skills.

Japan's embrace of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s led to the rise of those IJA officers with German backgrounds. Of the five major generals who held the Army's top intelligence post of 2nd Bureau chief between July 1937 and December 1941, two had taken their postgraduate assignments in Germany and one in the Soviet Union. The two with German backgrounds successively held the position as Japan began the countdown to war in 1941. Officers with a pro-German orientation were also found in the War Ministry, including Lt. Gen. Muto Akira, chief of the key Military Affairs Bureau from September 1939 to April 1942.

An Attaché in London

Tatsumi's contacts overseas arguably helped turn him into one of the IJA's few intelligence officers who appreciated the strategic weight of Great Britain and the United States. His contact with Ambassador Yoshida Shigeru, under whom he served in his first tour in London as military attaché, likely contributed to his development.

In the summer of 1936, Tatsumi arrived with a message from Tokyo for Yoshida. In effect, Tokyo assured the Ambassador that Japan would suffer no disadvantage by simply joining Germany in ideological solidarity

in the proposed Anti-Comintern Pact. Yoshida rejected Tokyo's argument that the agreement would have no adverse political or military repercussions. The future prime minister clearly foresaw the danger of the pact leading one day to military alliance with Germany and ultimately conflict with the Anglo-American powers.

Tatsumi, either swayed by Yoshida or already thinking along the same lines, cabled Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ)⁴ Army Section that he could not convince the stubborn Ambassador. Tatsumi's counterpart in Berlin, Maj. Gen. Oshima Hiroshi, the pact's major backer, arrived in London several days later to browbeat Yoshida. Oshima returned to Berlin in a bad mood the next morning without changing Yoshida's opposition.⁵ Tatsumi probably was impressed to see the Ambassador hold his ground against Oshima and the consensus in Tokyo.⁶ Tatsumi developed a lasting relationship with Yoshida who, as Japan's most influential postwar prime minister, made good relations with the Anglo powers the cornerstone of his foreign policy.

Fighting the Axis Alliance

Tatsumi himself was soon engaged in his own lonely fight against the main current in Tokyo. An explosive issue arose soon after he returned to Tokyo in 1938 to head AGS 2nd Bureau's 6th Section. One month into his new assignment, Maj. Gen. Kasahara Yukio returned from a

secret mission to Berlin with a proposal from Hitler to forge a tripartite alliance with Italy. From Berlin, Oshima sent numerous cables to Tokyo endorsing the proposal.

Tatsumi, all but alone in conferences of IGHQ Army Section colleagues, argued against the proposal which he saw as drawing Japan into a disadvantageous European war. His views incurred hostility from influential IJA officers, especially Lt. Col. Iwakuro Hideo, chief of the War Ministry's Army Affairs Section, who attacked Tatsumi for his "pro-Anglo, weak-kneed arguments."

In the end, Navy opposition to the proposal led to a weak compromise that Hitler spurned in favor of a nonaggression pact with Moscow. Tatsumi, who had gone with Navy and Foreign Ministry representatives to Berlin to negotiate, probably was relieved. He also had to have appreciated the note congratulating him on his mission's failure from his old boss, Lieutenant General Homma.⁷

Monitoring the War in Europe

Tatsumi subsequently left 6th Section for his second tour as military attaché in London, arriving there during the "Phony War" period in December 1939. Great Britain and France had by then already traded declarations of war with Germany, following Hitler's invasion of Poland, but had yet to fight. In May 1940, Tatsumi arranged with the British War Department to tour Allied defenses on the Continent and exchange views with his Berlin counterpart, Col. Okamoto Kiyotomi.

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Force's headquarters at Lille and French defenses along the Maginot Line. He subsequently met Colonel Okamoto at the Japanese Embassy in Brussels. On 9 May, Okamoto briefed him that there was no evidence of German preparations for an offensive. That night, Okamoto burst into Tatsumi's hotel room with news of the German invasion of Belgium. While Tatsumi made his way safely back to London, the incident is likely to have colored his view of the competence of the Japanese military mission in Berlin.⁸

The German blitzkrieg emboldened Japanese leaders in Tokyo to act. With the surrender of France and the Netherlands in June 1940, Tokyo put pressure on French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. The Army occupied northern French Indochina that summer on the pretext of blocking supplies to the Chinese Nationalists in Chungking. On 27 September 1940, Japan tied her destiny to the Axis belligerents by signing the Tripartite Pact in Berlin with Germany and Italy.

As German bombs fell on England, Tatsumi continued cabling IGHQ his assessments without regard to the political winds in Tokyo. Moreover, his reporting hit the mark. One advantage for Tatsumi and his staff was their ringside seat from which they observed the Battle of Britain. In Liverpool, for example, Assistant Military Attaché Col. Nakano Yoshio observed the British smash a German raid on 22 October. His office also cabled Tokyo that the British were using radar to devastating effect against the *Luftwaffe*.⁹

During the Battle for Britain in the fall of 1940, Tatsumi cabled Tokyo that German night bombings were causing considerable damage but

failing to break the British people's spirit. He also regarded the German shift from daytime to night air raids as evidence of the *Luftwaffe's* failure to gain air superiority. Consequently, he judged that Germany would not likely execute its planned invasion of the British Isles.¹⁰

In Tokyo, most IGHQ Army officers believed that Germany would defeat Britain. Lt. Gen. Tanaka Shinichi, chief of AGS 1st Bureau (Operations), expected Hitler to carry out his plan to invade the British Isles. Tanaka also looked forward to the invasion to clear the way for Japan to advance south. Conquering Southeast Asia would then resolve the war in China by eliminating British aid routes to the Chinese Nationalists. Maj. Gen. Okamoto Kiyotomi, who, after delivering his spectacularly wrong assessment of German intentions to Tatsumi in Brussels, had become 2nd Bureau chief, also believed that Germany would invade and defeat Britain. The 2nd Bureau's German Section and other analysts backed his judgment.¹¹

Tatsumi thus angered officers in the Army High Command by contradicting the analytic basis on which they were preparing for war. Army officers in IGHQ muttered that he had fallen under the spell of British propaganda. Okamoto, concerned for his old classmate from both the Military Academy and War College, discreetly sent Tatsumi a message warning him that his reports were

stirring up a hornet's nest in IGHQ. Tokyo's comprehensive analysis of the intelligence from various countries concluded that Hitler could not abandon his planned invasion of Britain. Okamoto thus counseled Tatsumi not to cable such weak-kneed assessments, but Tatsumi resolved to continue his reporting. Otherwise, he feared that the overwhelming Army fascination with Germany and disregard for the Anglo-Americans would take Japan down the path to disaster.¹²

Countdown to War in 1941

As Tokyo planned for war in 1941 against the Anglo-Americans, Tatsumi in London continued to sound the alarm. As was the case with Yoshida Shigeru, Ambassador Shigemitsu Mamoru proved an ally who shared Tatsumi's concerns. Shigemitsu, while not showing Tatsumi's courage to report his views frankly, did appear influenced by his military attaché. In mid-April 1941, the Ambassador indirectly challenged Tokyo's direction by posing a series of questions in a cable that reads as though written with contributions from Tatsumi. Shigemitsu questioned whether Germany, "without command of sea or command of British daylight air," would be able to invade and conquer Great Britain any time during 1941.

Shigemitsu in the same cable also questioned the Tripartite Pact's value in deterring Washington, asking whether the alliance made it "more likely or less likely" that the United States would enter the war on Great Britain's side. Finally, Shigemitsu suggested that Italy was more a burden than an ally for Germany. He asked whether the Italian fleet was "as good at sea as on paper," or even

"as good on paper as it used to be." He warned that Anglo-American naval strength, if combined, would both "dispose of the Axis powers in Europe" and "deal with" Japan.¹³

Heading for Disaster

Tatsumi, for all the accuracy of his reporting from London, could not in 1941 shake Tokyo's faith in the German war machine. In Western Europe, the German military had taken all objectives but Great Britain. Germany then invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 in concert with Finland, Hungary, and Romania. On 16 June, Hitler had warned Lt. Gen. Yamashita Tomoyuki, head of a military technology survey mission in Germany since January, about Germany's planned offensive against the Soviet Union. Hitler also requested that Japan assist its Axis partner by launching an attack on Siberia from Manchukuo. Yamashita immediately cabled Tokyo from Berlin with the news, then left to brief the Japanese leadership in Tokyo.¹⁴

Yamashita returned to Tokyo to find the Army ready to act. At IGHQ, Army officers awed by Germany's thrust across the Soviet border laid plans to act before they "missed the bus." That is, rather than question the wisdom of their German partners opening a second front before invading Britain, IGHQ officers were eager to enter the war before Germany extended its gains to Asia.

On 28 June, Yamashita briefed War Minister Lt. Gen. Tojo Hideki, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Sugiyama Gen, and other key IJA staff for over two hours on the situation in Europe. Yamashita recommended that the IJA honor Hitler's request

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by ordering the Kwangtung Army to launch an offensive from Manchukuo. The Army began preparations the following day to strengthen the Kwangtung Army for invasion, the activity disguised as special field exercises.¹⁵

On 9 August, however, Tokyo decided to take the "bus" south rather than north. One reason for deferring the planned thrust into Siberia was that it no longer appeared certain that the German military would fulfill Hitler's boast to conquer the Soviet Union by yearend. A second factor was the harmful effect of the oil embargo enacted by the Americans, British, and Dutch, following Japan's July occupation of southern French Indochina. Rather than accept Western demands to relinquish its occupied territories in Indochina and China, Japan's leaders decided to grab the Dutch East Indies for its oil fields. At the same time, Japanese forces would seize British and American possessions in the region.¹⁶ IGHQ officers judged that they could invade Siberia later and join Hitler in dividing Soviet territory.

In October, Tatsumi was cabling reports that flatly contradicted the reporting from Berlin and the premise on which IGHQ was preparing to go to war. Early in the month, Tatsumi predicted that German forces, whose offensive was already losing steam as their supply lines lengthened and the Soviets adopted scorched-earth tactics, would increasingly suffer with the advent of "general winter." He judged that the

Germans would almost certainly fail to take Moscow in 1941. In contrast, Ambassador Oshima in Berlin was reporting on 11 October that "the Germans have dealt a devastating blow to the Soviet forces before the real winter sets in, as per plan," and that Hitler was on track to invade Great Britain.¹⁷

Tatsumi cabled another contrary report in late October. He judged that Germany's offensive against the Soviet Union was lagging, that American aid was strengthening British confidence in ultimate victory over Germany, and that the Anglo-Americans were standing united against Japan, following the occupation of southern French Indochina. In entering the war on Germany's side, Japan would thus risk fighting alone in Asia against the Americans, British, Chinese, and Soviets.

Tatsumi counseled that Japan should at all costs avoid hastily entering the general war. Rather, he suggested, Japan had first to resolve the fighting in China. Okamoto replied with IGHQ's analysis that the German offensive would resume in full force the following spring and in all probability defeat the Soviets. As for Japan's actions in the Far East, Tatsumi's old classmate declared, Tokyo would execute its national policy independently of its European allies.¹⁸

In the end, Tatsumi failed to deter IGHQ from sending Japan into war against the Anglo-American powers. Nor did he exercise his expertise during the war. Following Japan's thrust south, Tatsumi remained confined to the Japanese Embassy as an enemy alien until repatriation in July 1946. In Tokyo, Tojo first put him in charge of Tokyo's air defenses. Tatsumi ended the war commanding the

3rd Division in central China. He and his men were repatriated from Shanghai in May 1946.¹⁹

Why IGHO Ignored Tatsumi

In retrospect, few intelligence officers have been so right to so little effect as Lt. Gen. Tatsumi Eiichi. A roundtable conference in late 1978 of IJA officers who had served as military attachés in wartime Europe underscores this point. Lt. Col. Katogawa Kotaro, the conference moderator, remarked that Tatsumi's analysis in October 1941 had been "right on the mark." The problem was that he failed to persuade IJA policymakers to delay their war of aggression until Germany conquered Europe and Japan ended the fighting in China.²⁰

Moreover, seldom had the consequences of ignoring intelligence proven so dire for Japan. Katogawa indicated as much to the former military attachés, when he said that Japan had conducted its national policy, including signing the Tripartite Pact, on the premise that Hitler would invade and defeat Great Britain. Only after the war, Katogawa noted, did it become clear that Hitler had begun planning Germany's disastrous invasion of the Soviet Union even before Tokyo had signed the treaty.²¹

A general suspension of critical judgment regarding Germany among IJA senior officers was behind IGHQ's intelligence failure. Reading Oshima's decrypted "Magic" cables from Berlin, for example, one is struck by the lack of analysis. His reports often read as little more than detailed repetitions of what Hitler, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, or one of the German generals told him in meetings.²² Col. Hori Eizo, a young intelligence

officer during the war in 2nd Bureau's German, Soviet, and Anglo-American sections, decried in his memoirs the IGHQ's "blind faith" in Germany. Compared to the rigorous Soviet analysis of Col. Hayashi Saburo's Russia Section, Hori found 2nd Bureau's German Section lacking.²³

The Army's failure to assess German wartime intentions and prospects was also the result of relying too much on access to German leaders to the detriment of other intelligence sources. In effect, Oshima's numerous meetings with Hitler and von Ribbentrop took the place of the painstaking methods, legal and illegal, that IJA intelligence officers used to gather intelligence, say, on the Soviet Union.

While Tatsumi cultivated a wide variety of contacts in London, including US Military Attaché Brig. Gen. Raymond E. Lee and various members of the British War Ministry, intelligence on Germany came largely from Oshima's Nazi friends and from the German Embassy in Tokyo. As for firsthand observations, Tatsumi was reporting directly on the Battle of Britain, while Oshima was chaperoned to various German field headquarters. In monitoring published information, Tatsumi had much more to glean from the British radio and press than Oshima could find in the Nazi media.

Too many IJA intelligence officers covering Germany lacked objectivity. They had developed over the course of their careers an uncritical sense of awe and affection for Germany that clouded their judgment. Col. Hayashi, for example, ascribed 2nd Bureau Chief Okamoto's willingness to accept information from the Germans at face value to his experience there as military attaché.²⁴ Maj. Gen.

Onodera Makoto and Col. Kotani Etsuo, military attaché in Stockholm and assistant attaché in Berlin, respectively, during the war, suggested to historian Alvin Coox that the years spent as military attaché also accounted for Ambassador Oshima Hiroshi's inclination to report as "gospel" the statements of Germany's leaders. In Coox's words: "Perhaps it was not so much that Oshima was being taken in by the Nazis as that he simply did not want to dwell on matters unfavorable to his beloved second homeland."²⁵

A Prophet With Honor

During the years when the IGHQ's Axis faction was dominant, Tatsumi was a lone voice in the wilderness. But Japan's defeat and occupation by the United States brought him and other Anglo experts to the center of power. Prime Minister Yoshida, in need of a military man he could trust, turned to his former attaché to serve as confidential liaison to General MacArthur's General Headquarters in Tokyo.²⁶ Yoshida also relied on Tatsumi for help in selecting IJA veterans to form the core of the postwar Ground Self-Defense Force. Tatsumi was thus one of the founding fathers of Japan's postwar military. The wartime prophet had become the prime minister's "most trusted military adviser."²⁷

Finally, Tatsumi rose to occupy an honored postwar position among former IJA officers. He became one of the leading members of the *Kaikosha*, the association of Imperial Military Academy officers. He served as *Kaikosha* chairman during 1975-78, then held the title of chairman emeritus until his death at age 93 in 1988.²⁸

NOTES

1. Japanese names in this essay appear in the Japanese order, surname followed by given name. Military ranks are those held by the officers at the time indicated.

2. Hata, Nobuhiko. *Nihon Rikukai-gun Sogo Jiten* (Dictionary of the Japanese Army and Navy); Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1991; pp. 91, 367.

3. Harries, Meirion and Susie. *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*; New York: Random House, 1991; pp. 48-50.

4. IGHQ, activated in 1937 to prosecute the war in China, was the military high command combining the Army and Navy. The Army Section consisted of key War Ministry bureaus and the Army General Staff (AGS).

5. Takayama, Shinobu. *Showa Meishoroku* (Famous Generals of the Showa Era), Vol. II; Tokyo: Fuyo Shobo, 1980; pp. 156-157.

6. Despite Yoshida's warnings, Tokyo inked the Anti-Comintern Pact that November.

7. Takayama, pp. 160-61, 243.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-166.

9. *Dainiji Taisen to Zaigai Bukan* (The Second World War and Overseas Military Attachés), Part V of series in *Kaiko*, February 1979; p. 12. *Kaiko* is the monthly journal of the *Kaikosha*, the association of Imperial Military Academy alumni.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

11. Takayama, p. 176.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

13. Department of Defense. Supplement to Vol. 1 of *The "Magic" Background to Pearl Harbor*. Washington, DC; 1970; p. A-160. Col. Takayama recalled after the war Tatum's arguing against Hitler's secret alliance proposal in 1938 by saying that the combined strength of the United States and Great Britain would far outweigh that of Germany and Italy. Anglo-American naval strength, in particular, would together rule the seven seas (see Takayama, pp. 162-63).

14. *Kaiko* (January 1979); p. 12. In an earlier indication, Yamashita heard in January from Lt. Col. Shimanuki Tsneyuki, stationed in Bucharest, that the Germans were working with the Romanians to build an invasion route through the Carpathian Mountains (see Takayama, p. 181). In another indication, an IJA officer in Berlin heard from a German counterpart on 22 May that Germany would invade (see *Kaiko*, January 1979; p. 12).

15. *Kaiko*, January 1979; p. 12. The exercises were called *Kantokuken*, or Kwangtung Army Special Exercises. Takayama wrote that only the Navy's opposition prevented the Army from invading Siberia, suggesting that together Germany and Japan could have brought down the Soviet Union by mid-1942 (see *Kaiko*, January 1979; p. 12).

16. Interestingly, Takayama claimed in his book that the Army originally had planned to seize only Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. The

Japanese Navy, believing that an attack on Great Britain would inevitably bring the United States into the war against Japan, convinced the Army to invade the Philippines as well.

17. Department of Defense. Appendix to Vol. 3 of *The "Magic" Background of Pearl Harbor*; pp. A-437-438.

18. Takayama, pp. 190-91; *Kaiko* (February 1979), p.13.

19. Takayama, pp. 194, 197-201.

20. *Kaiko*, March 1979, p. 13.

21. *Kaiko*, January 1979, p. 5.

22. One example of Oshima's uncritical reporting is a cable of 6 August 1941. Oshima first raises the issues of rumors "to the effect that the war in Russia is not turning out so well for Germany." He then dismisses such speculation by reporting a conversation of von Ribbentrop's statement to the contrary (see Appendix to Vol. 3 of *The "Magic" Background to Pearl Harbor*, p. A-401).

23. Hori, Eizo. *Daihonei Sanbo No Joho Senki* (An IGHQ Staff Officer's Record of Intelligence Warfare). Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 1989; p. 44.

24. Coox, Alvin D. "Japanese Net Assessment in the Era Before Pearl Harbor" in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, ed., *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II*. New York: The Free Press, 1992; p. 283.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 269. Nor was Oshima's regard for his second homeland unreciprocated. Nazi propaganda chief

Josef Goebbels confided in his journal of 21 March 1941 that Oshima was "the best of all" the Japanese he had met. (see *The Goebbels Diaries 1939-1941*. Translated and edited by Fred Taylor. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983).

26. Nakamura, Yuetsu. *Paidan: Taiwan Gun O Tsukutta Nihongun Shokotachi* (White Unit: The Japanese Military Officers Who Built Taiwan's Military). Tokyo: Fuyo Shobo, 1995; pp. 105-06.

27. Yoshitsu, Michael. *Japan and the San Francisco Peace Settlement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; p. 61.

28. Hata, p. 91.