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# NAVAL HISTORY

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## Fighting to Save the **YORKTOWN**

Remembering the Yangtze Patrol

Brothers in Peril at Pearl Harbor

Advisers, Spies, and the Rise  
of Japanese Naval Aviation

When the Navy Lost a Nuke

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## 'THE AMERICAN DIVE BOMBERS DESCENDED LIKE DOOM'

From 1942 to 1945, Ernest M. Eller served on the staff of Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CinCPac). Shortly before the Battle of Midway erupted in June 1942, then-Commander Eller was among the select staff who flew to the atoll with Nimitz to assess readiness for the pending clash, as well as to boost morale. Eller's role, he said, was "from the standpoint that there would be a report on this operation that could be very significant." Eller later recounted his headquarters'-eye view of the action that unfolded at Midway—including the fate of the USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) (see "Fighting for Survival," pp. 14–21)—in a 1977 oral history interview with the U.S. Naval Institute.



NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

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At his desk at CinCPac Fleet Headquarters, Ernest Eller was far from the Battle of Midway. He gleaned information about it, such as the plight of the *Yorktown* (left), from eyewitnesses. As he wrote a report of the battle for Admiral Nimitz, he realized the United States had won a great victory. "Later on," he recalled, "I came to think of it as the real turning point of the war."

**W**e were trying to make a combined attack in which the torpedo planes, the bombers, and the fighters would all arrive at the same time. The fighters were up high, and the torpedo planes were coming in low. The bombing squadron hadn't yet located the Japanese and was off on a slightly different course. The torpedo planes went in and were nearly all shot down; our fighter planes were waiting for the bombers, and I'm not sure they could have done much good for the torpedo planes, anyway. So all squadrons of torpedo planes were finished. Yet their sacrifice made victory possible.

The USS *Hornet's* [CV-8] bombers and fighters searched south toward Midway for the Japanese and missed the battle. All we had left were the dive bombers of the *Yorktown* and *Enterprise* [CV-6]. Just as the last torpedo attack ended, with the Japanese fighters down low combating them, the American dive bombers descended like doom and devastated three of the four Japanese carriers—the fourth, the *Hiryū*, was hidden under a cloud bank.

So the fate of Midway—and in many ways the fate of the war—was decided by around a hundred men. Of course, you have to count the others, because the torpedo planes had brought the Japanese fighters down from the sky. Therefore, our bombers could go in and attack. The attacks from Midway had a very beneficial effect on the battle in forcing the Japanese to maneuver, delaying rearming and launching attacks against our carriers.

Information was coming through in fragments. At first we were dismayed when we began to get reports of what was happening on Midway with the destructive raids of the Japanese. Then the reports from the planes that survived the early attacks weren't encouraging. They didn't seem to have hit anything, or didn't claim much, anyhow. This was all happening so fast, of course, that we were enveloped in a maze of information, some good and some bad. By late in the day we began to get a better picture, though. We had hit three of the carriers and they were burning, verified by a submarine that reported seeing this, and sending torpedoes into one of them.

We were feeling pretty good around the staff in the afternoon. Then the *Yorktown* was hit. We didn't know how many Japanese carriers really were out there. The night came on. Our carrier pilots found the *Hiryū* late in the day and hit her, and she ultimately sank. The *Yorktown* lost power; she got power back and then she was hit again by another group of planes. She took a very heavy list and the captain abandoned ship, which nobody was happy about. Then she floated all night and through 5 June. The next morning, the captain went back with a salvage party to try to save her. With a fleet tug towing her and a destroyer alongside, she was being righted and making headway toward Pearl Harbor on the 6th.

Then a Japanese submarine torpedoed and sank the destroyer alongside, the USS *Hammann* [DD-412].

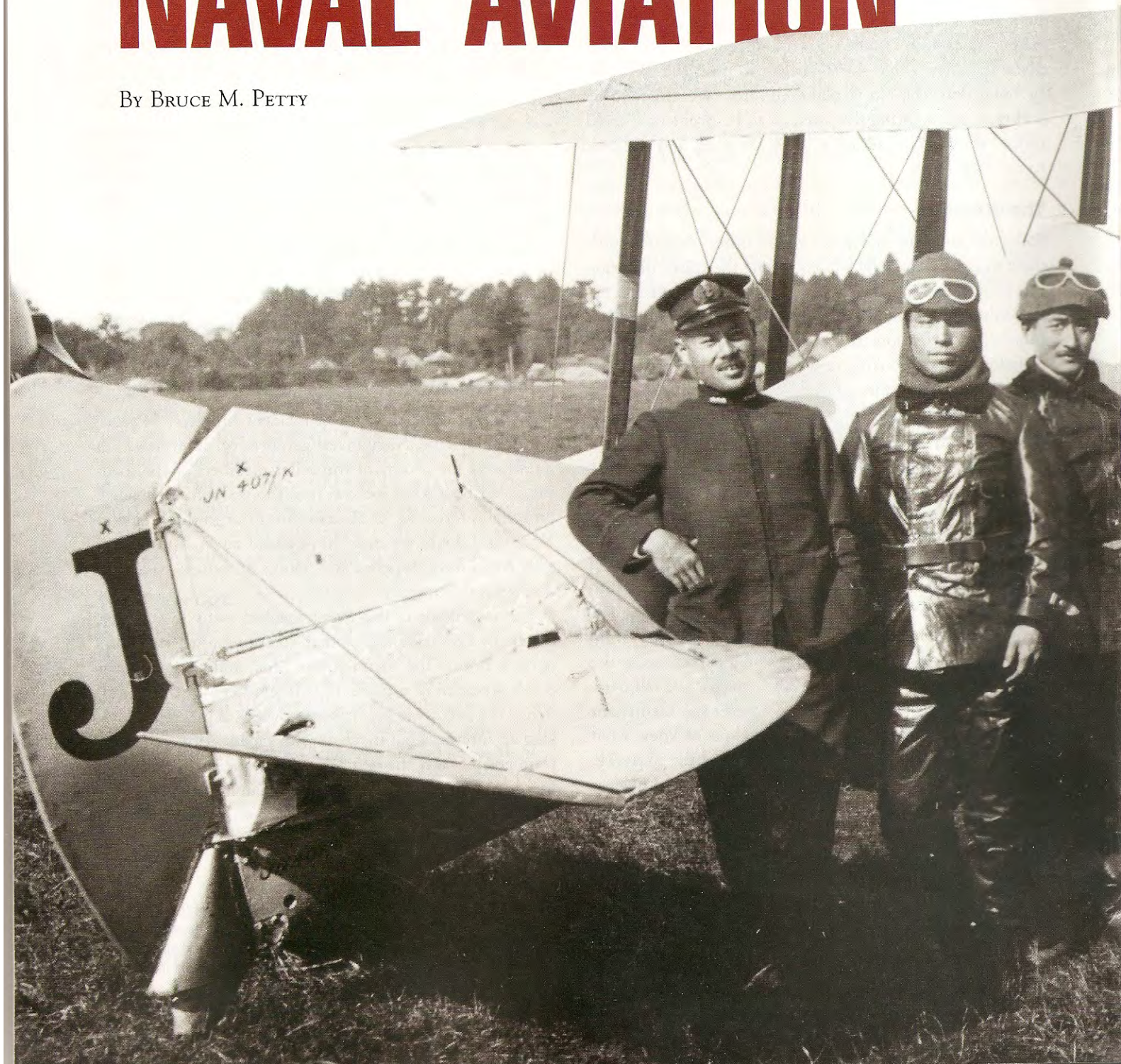
Other torpedoes hit the *Yorktown*, knocking people overboard. I had a classmate, Lieutenant Commander Ernest J. Davis, who was the gunnery officer. He was up on deck. They were tossing guns and heavy equipment overboard to right the ship. When the torpedo hit, he was blown overboard, and the *Hammann* was sinking fast. As she went down, her depth charges exploded. He had an old-fashioned gold pocket watch, and it was crushed to about the thickness of a silver dollar against his thigh. He too was crushed inside, but he recovered. This is the sort of concussion that you get in water when there is an underwater explosion. I suppose he was treading water so he got the heavy impact mostly below his waist.

After the battle, I started on the report, and I interviewed everyone I could get in touch with. I interviewed all the flag officers, captains of ships, gunnery officers, squadron commanders of planes, and others, and I asked them to all send in full reports. So I guess that for Midway, I got the fullest picture of any battle that I wrote action reports on, because they were all there. They all came into Pearl Harbor, and I talked to them right away when their recollections were fresh.



# JUMP-STARTING JAPANESE NAVAL AVIATION

BY BRUCE M. PETTY



Led by the Sempill Mission, British aviation experts assisted the Japanese Navy's nascent aerial program in the air and on the ground. But in some cases, the help crossed into the realm of espionage.



A Sempill Mission British flying instructor stands with Japanese naval aviators in front of a Gloster Sparrowhawk I. As part of the mission, 50 of the carrier fighters were supplied to the Japanese Navy in 1921.

**B**Y THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR II in the Pacific, the Imperial Japanese Navy had ten aircraft carriers, advanced naval planes, and some of the most highly trained aviators in the world. Opposing pilots feared the A6M2 Zero fighter, and few Allied ships that were attacked from the sky survived without strong antiaircraft defenses and fighter cover. However, the Japanese naval air arm was not wholly homegrown. It had received help from Great Britain.

Much of the assistance came courtesy of the Sempill Mission—officially known as the British Aviation Mission to Japan—formed and led by William Forbes-Sempill, a Scotsman who later inherited the title of lord from his father. An aviation pioneer during the Great War, he and other veteran fliers, such as Frederick Rutland and Edwin H. Dunning, were instrumental in the evolution of aircraft carrier operations.

Born in September 1893, Sempill dropped out of Eton at 16 and set off to invent himself. He developed a reputation and a following early by setting several flying records. In 1914, during the opening days of World War I, he volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps; he later transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service. The two services would later merge to become the Royal Air Force (RAF). At war's end, Sempill was a colonel in the RAF. By then, the Royal Navy possessed the first flush-deck aircraft carriers and had laid down the first purpose-built carrier. The U.S. and Japanese navies soon followed suit in an effort to stay apace with what some thought might be an important innovation in the future of naval warfare.

### **Anglo-Japanese Ties**

At the time, British assistance to the Japanese Navy seemed almost natural. Since the service's inception in 1869 during the Meiji Restoration, it had been modeled on the Royal Navy, and its first steam-powered ships were built in British shipyards.

In 1902, Japan and Great Britain allied themselves when they signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which bound the two countries to safeguard each other's interests in Asia. Originally suggested by Great Britain to protect itself against Russian expansion in the region, the treaty proved to be more advantageous to Japan after that country came to blows with Czarist Russia, which was seeking to expand its influence into Manchuria and Korea. The 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War resulted in the first major defeat of a European power by an Asian nation.

During World War I, while Britain was tied down fighting Germany, the alliance obligated Japan to guard British interests in China. Taking advantage of the pact during

the opening months of the Great War, Japan—initially not directly involved in the fighting in Europe—declared war on Germany. In 1914, it seized German possessions in Asia and the western Pacific, namely, the Chinese port of Tsingtao and German Micronesia (the Mariana, Caroline, and Marshall islands). Germany had purchased the island groups from Spain just 15 years earlier.

### **Mission to Japan**

In the summer of 1920, the Japanese ambassador in London, Hayashi Gonsuke—an erstwhile friend, ally, and admirer of the Royal Navy—asked that an official British naval aviation mission be sent to Japan. The Admiralty was against the proposal, not wanting to help a foreign nation challenge its supremacy, even if it were an ally and guarantor of British interests in Asia. However, other governmental entities, such as the Foreign Office, Air Ministry, and Department of Trade, with a nudge from the British aviation industry, were in favor. As a result, a compromise was reached. The effort would proceed as an unofficial civil aviation mission, but Britain still would come to regret the results a generation later.

Sempill started assembling the mission in early 1921. In September, the delegation's 30 instructors and support staff arrived at Kasumigaura, outside Tokyo, where the Japanese had begun constructing an air base. Training soon commenced. The mission would include almost 100 British-built aircraft, including Avro 504 K/L trainers, Gloster Sparrowhawk carrier fighter planes, Parnall Panther carrier reconnaissance aircraft, Blackburn Swift and Sopwith Cuckoo Mk II carrier torpedo bombers, Supermarine Seal and Vickers Viking amphibian flying boats, and Felixstowe F5 flying boats.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

William Forbes-Sempill's aerial experiences in World War I led to his selection to lead the mission to instruct the Japanese in aspects of naval aviation ranging from flying to carrier construction. His later spying for Japan would lead to his resignation from the Admiralty.

Over the following 18 months, the first generation of Japanese aviators was taught how to fly, take off from and land on a carrier deck, and dogfight, and received instruction in navigation and the use of aerial torpedoes. In addition, Sempill Mission experts helped with the design and construction of Japan's first aircraft carrier, the *Hōshō*, which had been laid down in 1919. To further this end, the mission arrived with details of the Royal Navy carriers *Argus* and *Hermes*. (Ironically, the *Hermes* would be sunk by Japanese carrier aircraft in the Indian Ocean during the early months of the Pacific war.) Other British advisers not directly involved in flying taught aircraft maintenance, fleet cooperation, armaments, and the use of parachutes and aerial photography.

Members of the mission received 150 percent of their RAF salaries, plus expenses. They also were given temporary rank in the Imperial Japanese Navy and uniforms designed by Sempill. Capping off the mission was the establishment of shore facilities for floatplanes, maintenance, and instruction. In 1920, the Japanese had begun production of flying boats with the assistance of the British firm Short Brothers. At the conclusion of the mission, the Japanese presented Sempill with the Order of the Rising Sun (Third Class), and other members of the delegation received medals and samurai swords.

## Other Advisers to Japan

British aviation companies had hoped the Sempill Mission would result in new orders, but this did not come to pass on a large scale. Instead, Japanese companies copied foreign designs and incorporated them in the manufacture of their own aircraft, Mitsubishi being the primary beneficiary.

The Sempill Mission was not the full extent of British aid to Japan's naval aviation efforts. Mitsubishi hired several former British naval aviators as technical advisers and test pilots. These included Frederick J. Rutland, who, while piloting a floatplane, had spotted German warships just prior to the Battle of Jutland; William L. Jordan, the first person to take off from and land on a Japanese carrier—the *Hōshō*; and Herbert Smith, a design engineer from the Sopwith Aviation Company.

In 1930–31—well after the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had lapsed—the Imperial Japanese Navy invited two more British aviators to Japan. At the Yokosuka Naval Base, Lieutenant Commander Roy W. Chappel and a Lieutenant Wingate gave instruction on the latest advances in aerial tactics. One of their students was Lieutenant Minoru Genda, who helped plan the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

All these British interwar endeavors gave Japan a giant leap forward in its development of naval aviation.

## British Clandestine Assistance

Sempill evidently had become enamored of Japan—too enamored. After he returned to England in 1923, he remained in contact with the Japanese through their embassy in Lon-



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Members of the mission received 150 percent of their former Royal Air Force pay and were outfitted in uniforms specially designed by Sempill. Above: An unidentified adviser wearing the Sempill uniform is pictured with a friend outside aircraft hangars in Japan.



For members of the Sempill Mission, their assignment in Japan was not all work. Above: British advisers and Japanese Navy and Army officers enjoy a local festival that featured a Shinto ceremony and athletic contests.

don, and over the years he passed confidential, and in some cases secret, information related to naval aviation. By 1926, the British Directorate of Military Intelligence had become aware of his activities, but Sempill's situation was complicated on several levels. It was feared that his prosecution might reveal to the Japanese that their diplomatic codes had been compromised. Also, Sempill took a seat in the House of Lords after the death of his father in 1934 and was a member of Winston Churchill's inner circle.

Complicating the situation even further was the fact that Sempill had become associated with Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and other pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic groups. At the very least, the argument could be made that he was a Japanophile. If he was a spy, he did not go out of

his way to hide the fact that he was in the pay of the Japanese. Much of what he shared with his Japanese paymaster had passed through the regular mail.

Among other things, Sempill was not given to living within his means. He almost constantly was in debt, which may have added impetus to his continued efforts to provide the Japanese with whatever they wanted. Despite his nefarious activities, Sempill was given a position in the Admiralty's Department of Materiel when World War II broke out in 1939.

In May 1940, Mosley was interned for the duration of World War II because of his pro-Nazi activities. Sempill, however, continued to work at the Admiralty. This may have had to do with the fact that Mosley was more outspoken publicly than Sempill and connected with Germany, not Japan, with whom Britain was not yet at war.

However, Frederick Rutland would be interned for spying for Japan. Rutland had retired from the RAF in 1923 after having begun to assist the Japanese Navy covertly. He later joined Mitsubishi as a civilian contractor. He continued to surreptitiously assist the Japanese through the 1920s, 1930s and into the 1940s, having moved to Hawaii in 1933. His espionage activities would end when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Back in Britain, he was arrested and interned at the request of the United States. When he finally was released in 1945, he thought he could salvage his reputation. Having failed at that, he took his own life in 1949.

### Investigating Wartime Spies

In October 1941, just more than a month before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and British holdings in the Far East, Anthony Blunt of MI5—an arm of the Directorate of Military Intelligence—wrote a report on Japanese intelligence networks throughout the British Empire. At the

The Imperial Japanese Army also received aviation assistance from a Western power after World War I. In 1919, a French Air Corps team arrived in Japan to train and advise the service. French aviators are pictured with Japanese Army and Navy dignitaries, including Admiral Heihachiro Togo (front row, fourth from left).





Not a member of the Sempill Mission, Battle of Jutland hero and aviation pioneer Frederick Rutland spied for Japan, providing information on aircraft carrier design. After the Pearl Harbor attack, he was interned for the duration of the war.

time, Blunt, as a member of what became known as the Cambridge Five, was spying for the Soviet Union. As he pointed out in his report, Japan ran its networks primarily through its embassies and consulates, which served as collecting points. Besides Japanese nationals gathering intelligence, British citizens, many with pro-Nazi and pro-Japanese sentiments, played a role.

One British citizen born in New Zealand—Indian Army Captain Patrick Heenan—was caught passing intelligence on the defenses of Singapore to the Japanese embassy in Thailand by way of frequent visits there. He was executed shortly before Japan captured the island colony. Other sources of Japanese intelligence were members of Parliament, the Foreign Office, and the military. Blunt wrote in his report:


On 30 September 1940, Lord Sempill undertook to the Admiralty not to discuss any official matters with the Japanese. Since then, however, he has maintained contact with them, and there are grounds [telephone taps] for supposing he has not broken off his contacts. . . . We cannot conclude from the foregoing that Lord Sempill is consciously acting as an agent for the Japanese, but the risk is a serious one, given that he holds the position he now does in the Admiralty.

In December, after more evidence of his espionage was discovered, Sempill agreed to retire. To quote Churchill: "At any moment we may be at war with Japan, and here are all these Englishmen, many of them respectable, two of whom

I know personally, moving around collecting information and sending it to the Japanese Embassy."

### Road to Pearl Harbor

Through the Sempill Mission and subsequent assistance, British aviation specialists provided the Japanese with expertise, equipment, and training that allowed them to fast-track their naval aviation program almost in lockstep with the Royal Navy. Some have argued that without their help, Pearl Harbor would never have taken place. Or, at the very least, the Japanese Navy would have taken longer to reach the point at which it was able to execute such an audacious carrier strike.

The Sempill mission undoubtedly was a success in that it provided the training and equipment needed to transform Japanese naval aviation along the lines of what the Royal Navy had accomplished. From the mission's conclusion in 1923 into the 1930s, Japanese naval aviation expanded rapidly. It is difficult to know how many Japanese aviators went through the program, but by 1930, Japan had three aircraft carriers and more than 100 carrier-based aircraft, matching the respective Royal Navy numbers at that time. 

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Mr. Petty, a Vietnam War veteran, served two years on board the USS *Yorktown* (CVS-10) as an aviation ordnanceman and earned a history degree from the University of California at Santa Barbara. While living on Saipan he researched and wrote *Saipan: Oral Histories of the Pacific War* (2002). His books also include *New Zealand in the Pacific War* (2008). Both are published by McFarland & Company.