

AUSTRALIA AND PEARL HARBOUR MESSAGE

U.S. Allegations Puzzling

By ROSS GOLLAN, Our Canberra Correspondent

Would undelayed transmission from Australia on December 6, 1941, of a despatch by Colonel Merle Smith, then United States military attache at Melbourne, have helped to forewarn the Americans of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour? That is a question which apparently has to be inferred from last Thursday's proceedings in Washington of the United States Senate Pearl Harbour investigation committee. It is a question which can hardly go unanswered if it is likely to cause even the least misunderstanding between two nations who were made blood-brothers by the Pacific war.

BUT the memories of Australian observers who were close to the Australian Government scene in the week before Pearl Harbour hardly agree with all the evidence given to the Senate committee by Colonel Rufus Bratton, chief of the United States Army's Far Eastern military intelligence section.

Colonel Bratton said that the Australian Government held up for 17 hours a military attache's message warning the United States War Department and the Hawaii Command that the Dutch Government had put its war plan into operation because of Japanese naval movements. He added that the message was finally delivered 12 hours after the Japanese began their attack on Pearl Harbour.

A Senator Ferguson asked Colonel Bratton whether he knew if the Australian Government had held the message until it could have a Cabinet meeting. Colonel Bratton replied, "I think that was it."

Against Colonel Bratton's thought here is some of your correspondent's recollection of the few Australian days before Pearl Harbour, verified by reference to his clippings of the period.

Late on the afternoon of Friday, December 5, 1941, he happened to be in a small group of people to whom John Curtin,

group of people to whom John Curtin, Prime Minister of Australia, was talking on the steps of Victoria Barracks, Melbourne.

The Signal Arrives

The talk could not have been far removed from the only subject which was in Australians' minds at that moment: the real purpose of the Japanese expedition which was sailing south from its homeland.

With papers in his hand, Mr. (now Sir Frederick) Sheddell, Secretary of War Cabinet, approached the group and called Mr. Curtin aside. The papers contained the signal in which the Dutch said that they were putting their war plan into operation and asked for promised Australian co-operation.

As soon as he had seen the signal, Mr. Curtin ordered the reassembly of War Cabinet, which had adjourned a little while previously. The War Cabinet meeting began within half an hour, and lasted only 25 minutes. It approved an immediate beginning with the co-operation for which the Dutch asked.

Mr. Curtin made no announcements in his own name after that meeting. But very late the same night he held the smallest and most important of all his Press conferences in his sitting-room at a Melbourne temperance hotel. He stressed

Press conference in his sitting-room at a Melbourne temperance hotel. He stressed his feeling that the Australian public needed to know forthwith the gravity of the position.

Following that conference your correspondent sent from Melbourne, with a preface that it was not of a type which need or should be submitted to censorship, news matter which can be found in filed copies of the "Herald" of Saturday, December 6, 1941.

War Or Peace

It began: "The question of war or peace in the Pacific may be decided within the next few days. Chief developments of the past 24 hours as now known in Australia are:—

"(1) The almost certain breakdown of negotiations between the United States and Japan.

"(2) The continued steady southward movement, established by democratic reconnaissance, of a Japanese amphibious expedition, with a destination and objects which Japan has failed to declare in reply to inquiries by the United States.

"(3) The putting into operation yesterday of a section of previously prepared plans for collaboration between Australia and the Netherlands East Indies in any circumstances which expose either country to the possibilities of aggression."

Other passages read: "The purpose of the southward movement of the Japanese expedition is regarded in high quarters as

the real key to the whole Pacific problem as it has developed this week.

"The expedition is moving in directions which could mean either aggression forthwith or a desire to achieve strategic points from which aggression would be possible at any moment Japan desired.

"Whether Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies or some other area, even the Philippine Islands, is the goal of the expedition will be decided only by the event.

"It is now known that the trend of events in the last few days, both diplomatically and strategically, has made it necessary to implement portion of the Netherlands East Indies—Australia section of the democratic cohesion plan.

"A communication from the Netherlands East Indies was, it is believed, the reason for the summoning of to-night's emergency meeting of War Cabinet, which agreed that the plan should be put into action.

"The position of the United States in the Pacific drama as it is unfolding itself

the Pacific drama as it is unfolding itself is being watched intently by Ministers. The latest development follows the virtual breakdown of talks between the United States and Japan, not between any other nation and Japan.

"It is thought in authoritative circles in Australia that it is difficult to envisage any developments from the present crisis in which other Pacific Democracies could be involved to the exclusion of the United States.

"If Japan is bent on aggression, it has, it is considered, as much purpose in being aggressive to the Philippines as to any other country.

"The action now being taken in concert by the Netherlands East Indies and Australia is, it is understood, known to the United States authorities."

Curtin Incredulous

Incidentally, the fact that a Japanese side-swing at Pearl Harbour was completely out of all Australian imaginings was best demonstrated by Mr. Curtin's own comment when he was shaken awake to hear the news of the Pearl Harbour bombing, which occurred in Australian time early on the morning of Monday, December 8, 1941.

"I don't believe it," said the Australian Prime Minister.

What are the obvious deductions for purposes of the present potential controversy from the facts given above?

Firstly, the alleged 17 hours hold-up by the Australian Government could not un-sided have prevented the American military attache's despatch being delivered long before the Pearl Harbour attack. Nearly 48 hours elapsed between publication on the Saturday morning in major Australian newspapers of the fact, now regarded as vital in the despatch, and the appearance of Japanese planes over Hawaii.

Secondly, the hold-up could not have been caused by a need for waiting on Cabinet decisions, which were made by War Cabinet approximately 60 hours before the Pearl Harbour attack.

Thirdly, the despatch could have given the United States no new information on the movements of the Japanese expedition. The Netherlands and Australia were actually acting on the information which they were themselves receiving from United States observation of the expedition's movements.

Fourthly, it was the Australian Government's own belief, on the Australian Friday night before Pearl Harbour, that the United States was aware that the Dutch plan was being put into immediate operation.

Fifthly, so far from wanting to hold information back from the United States Government, the Australian Government

information back from the United States Government, the Australian Government knew that it was in Australia's national interest that the United States should be supplied with every possible pointer to the seriousness of the position. The Australian nightmare for months and months before Pearl Harbour had in fact been that Japan would strike only at British possessions in the Pacific, that the American electorate might regard such a war as not its immediate concern, and that American entry to the war would not occur until Japan had a conquered Australia as springboard for further attack on the Democracies.

Was There Delay?

From an Australian point of view, it all boils down to whether there was, in fact, a delay in transmitting any message sent at that time by the American Military Attaché.

If there was a delay, there may be need for a heresy hunt amongst Australian bureaucrats. On the face of it, it seems that the despatch could not have averted Pearl Harbour. But it might have stressed to a friendly Government facts which the Australian Government must have desired that friendly Government to have in the forefront of its mind.

Last week was politically quiet. The general election shot-gun was bringing nearer a state of companionate marriage between the Liberal and Country parties. As the last of his not few dramatic Parliamentary strokes, Mr. Coles threw in a resignation which may result in a politically instructive by-election.

There have been numbers of recent signs that at the general elections the Government may find Victoria harder going than some other States. Considering all the circumstances, the Victorian general election a little while back did not produce the results Labour could have expected. It put a Labour Government into office, but not with the clear-cut majority that had looked on the cards. No Labour candidate ran in the Wimmera by-election a week ago, but electors showed little time for other candidates of radical views. If a real Labour-Liberal fight comes off in Henry, figures will be worth studying. Not that Labour can win the seat.