

WILLIAM H. DORRANCE

Scorched Earth Plans for O'ahu

FOLLOWING THE DECEMBER 7, 1941, Japanese attack on O'ahu, the government of the Territory of Hawai'i was placed under martial law administered by the U.S. Army. All civilian activities were conducted subject to the review and approval of the commander of the Army's Hawaiian Department and subordinates. Civilians found themselves burdened with sometimes poorly understood directives from the military, but patriotically complied. But not all appreciated the necessity for some of them.

So it was that late in July 1942 Sims Hoyt of the territory's Office of Civil Defense paid a visit to R. G. Newton, plant superintendent at California Packing Corporation, a large pineapple packer. The purpose of Sims's visit was to deliver a letter dated July 16, 1942, and addressed to Newton from the Office of the Department Engineer, Colonel Albert K. B. Lyman, Corps of Engineers. The letter was remarkable for what it contained. It said: "... [the department engineer] desires to formulate a plan and detailed arrangements for the total destruction of equipment, utilities, and material [of your factory] in the event the necessity therefore should arise. . . ." A questionnaire seeking a description of the property and a plan for its destruction accompanied the letter.¹

It took a while for Newton to digest the implications of this request. Finally, on August 17, 1942, he sent a letter to Colonel H. L.

William H. Dorrance served as an army officer during World War II and in the air force ready reserve until retirement. He is the author of Fort Kamehameha: The Story of the Harbor Defenses of Pearl Harbor (1993) and O'ahu's Hidden History (1998).

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Robb, acting department engineer (Lyman had died unexpectedly on August 13, 1942, two days after his promotion to brigadier general), stating "we have no one in our organization that we feel is properly trained or skilled to answer the questionnaire accurately. . . . We will be pleased to cooperate in any way possible with you and request that you arrange for some competent officer under your command . . . so that we can show him . . . our buildings and equipment. . . ."2

On September 17, 1942, an assistant department engineer responded, "It is anticipated that in the near future an officer in this command will inspect your premises and develop the necessary procedure to follow in the event it is necessary to consider destruction thereof."³ Indeed, the officer did visit, and the questionnaire was completed along with similar questionnaires prepared for 237 other business enterprises in O'ahu's South Sector. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a map showing the location of buildings, warehouses, storage tanks, railroad spurs, and other physical features and included such details as where explosives should be located to effect maximum destruction.⁴

This planning effort stemmed from a classified Scorched Earth Policy (SEP) promulgated under the commanding general of the Hawaiian Department, Lieutenant General Delos C. Emmons, and completed under his June 1, 1943, successor, Lieutenant General Robert C. Richardson.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

All of 1942 and early 1943 were months of anxiety and dread in the Territory of Hawai'i. The Japanese surprise attack had made it clear that the Islands were at the frontier of the nation's defenses and the destruction of the fleet at Pearl Harbor emphasized the Islands' vulnerability. There was a very real fear that the Japanese forces would return and occupy Hawai'i.

On February 15, 1942, the fortress at Singapore surrendered, exemplifying the weakness of Great Britain, the nation's strongest maritime ally. Then, on May 6, 1942, the courageous U.S. forces in the Philippines, weakened by hunger and exhaustion, surrendered to the Imperial Japanese Army. The future looked grim as by the end of 1942 Japan added all of Indo-China, Malaysia, Thailand, most of

Burma, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies to territory previously occupied in Korea, Manchuria, and China.

There was hope, however, that the tides of war would turn against the Japanese. During the first week in June 1942, a Japanese battle fleet was defeated near Midway Island. It had been Japan's intention to capture the island and establish a garrison there preparatory to an invasion of Hawai'i. A powerful task force, including four aircraft carriers and three battleships, accompanied several troopships transporting an invasion force of five thousand men.⁵

The Japanese attempt to land on Midway was turned back. U.S. forces had been alerted to the attempt by decoding intercepted radio traffic. The Midway complement of bombers was reinforced, and a Navy battle force moved into an intercept position. In the ensuing battle, Japan lost all four carriers. The troop transports turned tail and hastened back to home base. It was a glorious victory for the United States and, as subsequent events made clear, was the pivotal battle in the Pacific.

Nevertheless, the Japanese were far from defeated. The United States gathered its strength and in 1942 launched an offensive campaign in the Southwest Pacific. The Marines landed on Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942, intending to use the island's airfield as a base for aircraft to support the march northwest toward the Japanese stronghold on New Guinea. However, the Japanese didn't surrender the island without a prolonged and bloody fight and it wasn't until five months later, at the end of 1942, that the last of the Japanese army departed.

This was the grim situation when, on January 14 through 24, 1943, the Allied Powers held a strategic conference at Casablanca. There, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff presented a memorandum that stated, with respect to the Japanese offensive capabilities: "Japan's potentialities for offensive action during 1943 embrace: . . . (c) the Midway-Hawaii line—key to the Pacific. (d) the Hawaii-Samoa-Fiji-New Caledonia line, which covers the line of communications to Australia and New Zealand. . . ."⁶ It takes no stretch of the imagination to see that Hawai'i was the linchpin of two critical U.S. lines of defense and, because of the military advantage that would accrue to the Japanese should they occupy Hawai'i, the Joint Chiefs were not willing to rule out the possibility of an invasion attempt.

This was the thinking that guided high-level U.S. planning in 1942 and 1943. The United States must prepare plans to make Hawai'i militarily useless in the event, however remote, that the Japanese successfully invaded the Islands. This resulted in planning a scorched earth policy for Hawai'i. The planning was executed by the staff of the department and the district engineer, Brigadier General Hans Kramer, who had replaced General Lyman in September 1942.⁷

IMPLEMENTING SCORCHED EARTH PLANS

It took months after the August and September 1942 visits, meetings, and exchange of letters before significant progress was made in completing SEP plans for destruction of civilian and military facilities on O'ahu, Moloka'i, Lāna'i, and Kaua'i. As the planning proceeded, it became clear that two things were lacking: first, a general statement of the overall SEP plan giving instructions on just how, and by whom, the individual business enterprise's plans were to be coordinated and executed, and second, how buildings, transportation equipment, machinery, food stocks, and materiel could be most efficiently rendered useless. The department engineer's office moved to correct these deficiencies during the first half of 1943.

General overall governing SEP plans were developed for each district. The general plan for the Iwilei District of Honolulu serves as an example. Iwilei was the most heavily concentrated industrial district in Honolulu, being the location of the piers and wharfs of Honolulu Harbor and the location of the terminus of the O.R.& L. railroad. Large pineapple canneries and gasoline tank farms, among other commercial establishments, were then located in Iwilei and required SEP plans.

The general SEP plan for Iwilei District was classified CONFIDENTIAL and issued May 12, 1943.⁸ The stated purpose of the plan was "to coordinate the individual plans of the industries and works . . . and to provide for the control of those persons executing these plans. . . ." A control officer was designated by the South Sector commander [of O'ahu] to be in complete charge of coordination and execution of the plans.

The general procedure for executing the Iwilei District SEP plans was a four-phase sequence:

- a. First phase: Destruction of machinery and equipment with hand tools (i.e., sledge hammers).
- b. Second phase: Explosive charges.
- c. Third phase: Fire.
- d. Fourth phase: Artillery barrage.

The control officer was to come from the 34th Engineer Combat Regiment, and the field artillery was to provide fourth-phase artillery barrages.

The step-by-step actions of the control officer and his assistants were spelled out, leaving little to the imagination. A copy of this general plan, classified *CONFIDENTIAL*, was attached to each individual company SEP plan produced and kept for future reference by each company. The company-specific plans for destruction, classified *CONFIDENTIAL*, were prepared with the help of army engineers using on-site inspections, blueprints, maps, and materiel lists. Each company was instructed to limit access to its plan and to store its copy in a locked file, as was consistent with the Espionage Act governing control of, and access to, classified documents. The list of all enterprises on O'ahu for which individual SEP plans were prepared was classified *SECRET* and reads like a 1942–1944 “who’s who” of businesses on O'ahu.⁹

Similar plans were also prepared for military installations. The plans included forts, airfields, radar sites, motor pools, and storage yards. Destruction would be widespread when the time came to execute the plans, and facilities on O'ahu, Moloka'i, Lāna'i, and Kaua'i would be useless in the hands of the enemy.

The 34th Engineer Combat Regiment conducted experiments on destruction of materiel, and results were reported on August 13, 1943. The experiments, conducted from March 17, 1943, until and June 18, 1943, resulted in these conclusions: trucks and automobiles can be rapidly immobilized by contaminating the gasoline with asphalt, large quantities of flour can be contaminated by applying gasoline or turpentine, there is no quick way to destroy canned goods so try manually puncturing them or bursting them with high temperatures, and transformer oil will burn if heated sufficiently but other methods (unstated) are recommended to destroy them.¹⁰ Explosives were distributed to those concerns that could use them.

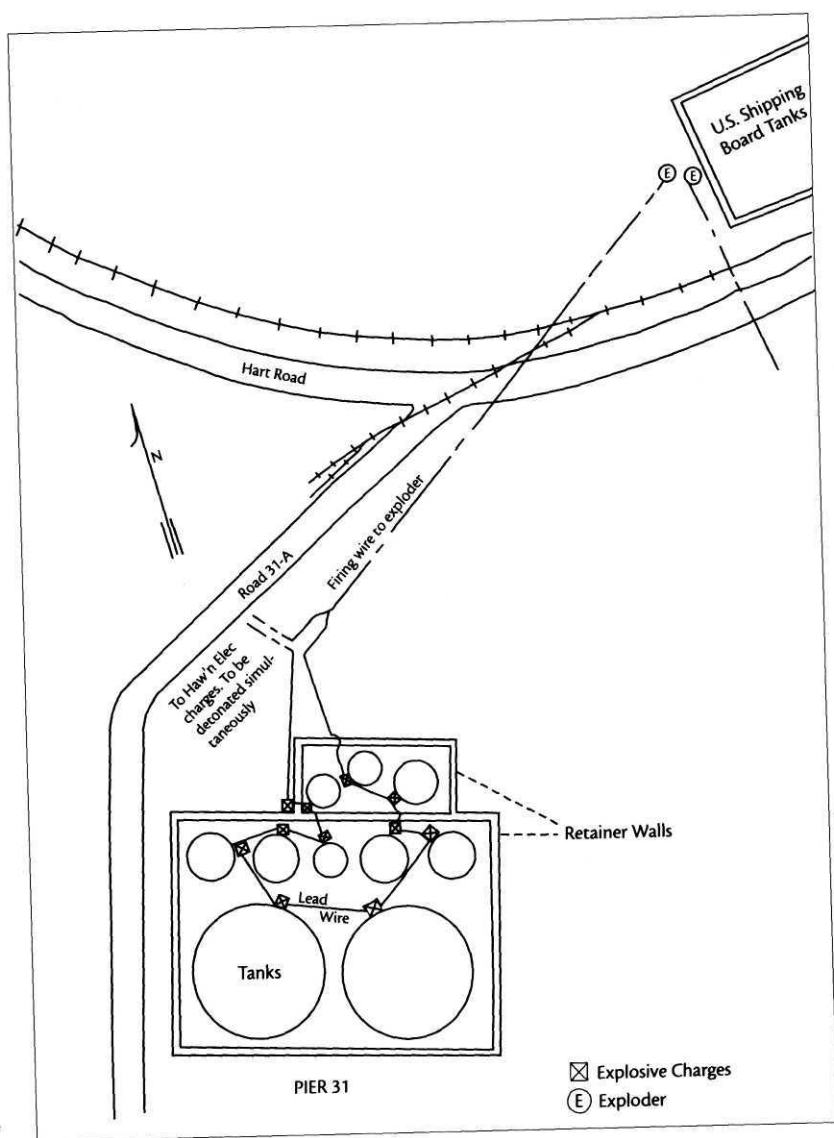


FIG. 1. Plan for destroying Shell Oil Company tank farm in Iwilei District. TNT charges were to be placed next to tanks and exploder located with the exploders for the nearby Standard Oil and Tidewater-Associated oil tank farms to facilitate simultaneous ignition. These tanks survive, but the O.R. & L. railroad tracks are long gone, and Nimitz Highway has replaced Hart Road in this locality. (Scorched Earth Plan, NA, RG 338)

The company SEP plans having been completed, it was time to prepare execution orders for each. Draft execution order letters were prepared and delivery route maps and civilian contacts at each location were identified with telephone numbers for use at that time when the enemy arrived.¹¹ The execution orders were held in a central location until the time came to issue them.

The CONFIDENTIAL execution orders were direct, one page, and all in the same format. For example, the order for the destruction of the Moana Hotel is extracted here.

Pursuant to the authority vested in me by the Commanding General of the Hawaiian Department of the United States Army you and each and every employee of the above named company [Moana Hotel, in this example] are hereby ordered and required, for the public defense, to immediately destroy and demolish all of the property hereinafter described. . . . [There followed two short paragraphs of supporting instructions not repeated here.]

The order went on to state:

All property, buildings, equipment, tools and other materiel owned or operated by the above named firm and located in the City of Honolulu, T.H., including all property at the following location: 2353 Kala-kaua Avenue.



FIG. 2. The Moana Hotel was completed in 1901. Two wings were added in 1918 to create this facade. The hotel was completely renovated in 1989, is currently operating, and is listed in the Hawai'i State and National Registers of Historic Places. (Hawai'i State Archives)

THIS ORDER IS NOT VALID UNTIL SIGNED BY AUTHORITY OF THE DEPARTMENT, SECTOR, OR DISTRICT COMMANDER CONCERNED.

By command of (To be signed by the District Commander, Task Force Commander, or North or South Sector Commander, according to the location of the property.)"¹²

It was discovered that both the district engineer's office and the Office of Civil Defense had produced private company SEP plans before the package of SEP plans was submitted for final approval.¹³ The plans were sorted, redundancies omitted, and additions made to the combination to accommodate late changes.

The package of SEP plans and draft orders was then submitted for final approval. The SEP plans for the North Sector of O'ahu were approved January 25, 1944.¹⁴ The plans for the South Sector were submitted simultaneously but were returned unapproved and needing changes. "It is not within the scope of the SEP to destroy all the buildings in Honolulu. Accordingly, it is requested that the use of explosives in the destruction of warehouses . . . be deleted from the plan. Fire and mechanical destruction will sufficiently destroy the supplies within the buildings."¹⁵

The package of SEP plans for the South Sector was changed accordingly and resubmitted for approval. The plans were approved on February 16, 1944.¹⁶ It was suggested that two copies of each individual company plan be retained by the department engineer (one to be held for the Headquarters, Hawaiian Department), one copy be sent to the sector commander, and one copy be sent to the company concerned.¹⁷ At the end of World War II all copies retained by the Army were declassified and went into the nation's archives.

CIVILIAN REACTIONS TO THE SCORCHED EARTH POLICY

At the date of writing (July 1998) there were few alive who could speak knowledgeably about the civilian reaction to the SEP. One who was alive was Frederick P. Lowery, who was secretary of Lewers & Cooke, Ltd., during World War II. Lewers & Cooke was a major supplier of lumber and building materials that suffered a severe drop in sales during the war. The company depended on supplies shipped from the mainland to stock inventory, and it took more than four

months after the December 7, 1941, attack before supplies began to dribble in again. Prices were controlled, restrictions under martial law negatively affected operations, and the company struggled to keep its head above water. Inventory was consolidated at one of the company's three yards, and the other two warehouse-yards were rented out to government agencies to improve cash flow. That was the picture when, in July 1942, a representative of the Office of Civil Defense delivered the department engineer's letter request that Lewers & Cooke prepare SEP plans for destruction of the company's properties.

"I remember the request, and, of course we cooperated fully with it," said Lowery. "They explained the need for the plans for destruction in case the Japanese returned and invaded us. We thought it was very doubtful. We knew about the Battle of Midway the very next day after the battle ended, and that we sank four Japanese carriers. It seemed doubtful to us that the Japanese would try again. How could they?"

When asked if his reaction prevailed among Honolulu's civilian executives and managers, Lowery replied, "I can't say, but I can say that all of us were pretty well informed, one way or another, about how the war was going."¹⁸

It is a matter of record that Lewers & Cooke cooperated fully with the engineer's request, and SEP plans for all four of its properties were among the package of 238 SEP plans prepared for companies within O'ahu's South Sector.¹⁹

NOTES

¹ Letter, R. J. Newton to Acting Department Engineer Col. H. L. Robb, Aug. 17, 1942. This letter quotes from the earlier letter received from the department engineer. National Archives, Record Group 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1 (hereafter: NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1).

² Letter, Newton to Robb, Aug. 17, 1942.

³ Letter, Maj. John E. Shield to R. G. [sic] Newton, Sept. 17, 1942. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

⁴ Office of the Department Engineer, "Scorched Earth Plans." NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

⁵ Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II—The War in the Pacific—Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1989) 279.

⁶ Morton, *United States Army*, Appendix H, 627–29.

⁷ Hans Kramer graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point ranked sixth in the class of 1918. He served with the engineers with the A.E.F. in France. From 1930 to 1932 he studied at the Technical University, Dresden, Germany, and was awarded the doctor of engineering degree. He served in several Corps of Engineers supervisory positions before being stationed on O'ahu in September 1942.

Albert Kualī Brickwood Lyman was one of three brothers in the prominent Hilo family who graduated from the Military Academy. He graduated from West Point ranked fifteenth in the class of 1909. He served with the engineers in France with the A.E.F. and subsequently with distinction in numerous Corps of Engineers assignments before being stationed on O'ahu in 1940. The airport in Hilo is named in his memory.

Lyman's older brother, Capt. Clarence K. Lyman, while serving with the cavalry, died on May 16, 1915, from injuries suffered in a polo match at Fort Shafter.

See Bvt. Maj. Gen. George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York*, Supplement, Volume VI-B, 1910–1920 (Saganaw, Mich.: Sherman & Peters) 1414, 1415, 1972. See also Cullum, Supplement, Volume VIII, 1930–1940 (Chicago: S. R. Donnelly & Sons, 1940) 215, 363.

⁸ Office of the Department Engineer, "General Plans for the Execution of the Scorched Earth Plans in the Iwilei District of Honolulu, T.H.," May 13, 1943. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

⁹ Office of the Department Engineer, "Scorched-Earth Plan—Honolulu Harbor Area," memorandum to commandant, 14th Naval District, Oct. 10, 1943. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

¹⁰ S.E.P. Officer, 34th Engineers, "Transmittal of Scorched Earth Experiments," memorandum to department engineer, Aug. 13, 1943. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

¹¹ Office of the Department Engineer, "Execution Orders," draft orders for ten civilian installations. NA, RG 338, Box G-316, folder 386.1.

¹² Office of the Department Engineer, "Execution Orders." See draft order for Moana Hotel.

¹³ Adjutant General's Office, Hawaiian Department, "Scorched Earth Plan," memorandum for the commanding general, United States Army Forces, Central Pacific Area, Oct. 27, 1943. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

¹⁴ Office of the Department Engineer, memorandum, paragraph 1. approval of the SEP for the North Sector, Jan. 25, 1944. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

¹⁵ Office of the Department Engineer, memorandum, paragraph 2.

¹⁶ Office of the Department Engineer, memorandum, approval of the SEP for the South Sector, Feb. 16, 1944. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.

- ¹⁷ Office of the Department Engineer, "Scorched Earth Plans." Paragraph 2 of this memorandum gives the suggested distribution list for approved SEP plans, May 8, 1943. NA, RG 338, Box G-315, folder 386.1.
- ¹⁸ Telephone interview, Frederick P. Lowery with William H. Dorrance, July 8, 1998.
- ¹⁹ Letter, F. D. Lowery, president of Lewers & Cooke, Ltd. to Headquarters, Department Engineer, Aug. 4, 1943. NA, RG 338, Box G-316, folder 386.1.

