

IMPROBABLE VOYAGE

THIS VINTAGE SAILING SHIP, ARMED WITH A THREE-POUNDER AND TWO MACHINE GUNS, SET OUT ON A 4000 MILE VOYAGE TO EVADE A MARAUDING AND VICTORIOUS JAPANESE NAVY

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The vessel was originally built in 1914 by the W.F. Stone Company in Oakland, California, and was taken over by the US Navy on 1 April 1918 and commissioned USS *Hermes*. Decommissioned on 16 January 1919, she was turned over to the Hawaiian territorial government and used to visit leper colonies. Returned to the USN, she was stricken from the Navy List on 1 July 1926. Sold in October of that year to the Lanikai Fish Company of Hawaii, she was renamed *Lanikai* and then went through a series of owners including MGM Studios where she was used in the movie *Hurricane* and after the film was completed, she became a company yacht. On 5 December 1941, she was once again taken over by the Navy and commissioned USS *Lanikai*. On 27 August 1942, she went to the Australian Navy as HMAS *Lanikai* and returned to US custody on 22 August 1945. She was sunk in 1947 during a typhoon at Subic Bay, Philippines, while being repaired for a previous owner.

At dusk on 26 December 1941, a small vessel threaded her way through the minefields at the entrance to Manila Bay; “destination unknown” according to the entry in the journal laboriously pecked out by her skipper on the ship’s only typewriter. Ahead, before she reached safety in southwest Australia, lay 4000 miles of hazardous waters controlled by the powerful Imperial Navy of Japan, behind her, a niche in history missed by the barest of margins.

On her after deckhouse, she mounted a three-pounder quick-firer considered the last word in the fighting top of USS *Oregon* at the battle of Santiago. On the fantail was a pair of .30-caliber World War I vintage Lewis guns. Stowed away below were cases of salmon and bags of rice; a dozen of her crew of 18 were Filipinos. She was the two-masted, 75-ton auxiliary schooner *Lanikai*, commissioned at the Cavite Navy Yard on 5 December 1941 as a ship of the US Navy.

Sailing in the soft tropic nights, holing up in jungle-fringed island hideouts by day, crossing open water under cover of blessed typhoons, *Lanikai* worked her way south to Makassar, Soerabaja, Tjilatjap, and Fremantle. Twice given up for lost, arriving unheralded in Australia 20 days out of Java as one of the few surface survivors of the East Indies debacle, *Lanikai*’s skipper was greeted incredulously by the US Navy in Perth. “My God! What are you doing here?” cried R/Adm. William R. Purnell, Chief of Staff to Commander Southwest Pacific. “You’re supposed to be dead!”

The summer of 1941 was clearly a prelude to war in the Far East for which the United States was by no means prepared. In the Philippines, desperate efforts were being made to close the gap between near defenselessness and a fair posture of readiness which might give pause to the advancing Japanese.

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, who as Secretary of State had crossed swords with the Japanese over the Manchurian incident, was eager to square accounts and vindicate his earlier judgment of the inevitability of continued Japanese expansion. He had taken the line that our only hope for a quick power buildup in the Far East lay

in a great augmentation of our heavy bomber force in the Philippines. General George C. Marshall currently urged the President to buy time, to draw out negotiations, to stall off hostilities until at least April 1942. By late November, it had become clearly apparent that Japan was then tactically disposed to commence a major operation. Her naval forces were massed in Indochina. A large convoy was being shadowed by our submarines as it passed south through the Formosa Straits.

The big question in everyone’s mind was where would the Japanese strike next. There was no real clue as to her next target. There was, however, the distinct possibility that Japan would bypass the Philippines, attack Singapore and the East Indies, and thus destroy our potential Allies while we sat on the sidelines. American public opinion at this point almost certainly would not have supported a war against Japan.

No one was more acutely aware of this danger than President Roosevelt. A memo by Harry Hopkins stated, “I remember when I was in England in February 1941, [Anthony] Eden

The author during his Navy service.



asked me repeatedly what our country would do if Japan attacked Singapore or the Dutch, saying it was essential to their policy to know. Of course, it was perfectly clear that neither the President nor Hull could give an adequate answer to the British on that point because the declaration of war is up to Congress, and the isolationists and, indeed, a great part of the American people, would not be interested in a war in the Far East merely because Japan attacked the Dutch.”

Sumner Welles added: “He [Roosevelt] did, however, make it very plain to me that he thought the immediate danger was an attack by Japan upon some British possession in the Far East, or even more probably



Kemp Tolley was widely traveled and well-read, becoming somewhat of an expert on the 1918 collapse of the Russian government. Tolley (center) and his understanding of the Soviet military mentality would lead to a Russian posting soon after his *Lanikai* adventure.