

Command Failure
US Army Air Forces Aviation and its Worst Peacetime Disaster
by

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Beneath Haunted Waters (Lyons Press) and
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The writing of history reflects interests and assumptions at the time of that writing. A disastrous US Army Air Forces training mission to California during late 1941 is a convincing example of how long it takes for such historical interests and assumptions to change. Past aviation historians will tell you they know all about this story. But they don't. What they will describe are the events. But what really happened? The how and why? The people?

On October 19, 1941, 25 United States Army Air Forces Curtiss-Wright P-40 Tomahawks from the 57th and 52nd Pursuit Groups plus their C-47 tender took to the sky from Selfridge Field in Michigan. Originating at Windsor Locks in Connecticut they were detailed to the west coast to test air defenses around McChord Army Air Base near Seattle. Secondarily they were to garner practical experience in group maneuvers and squadron flying. Three weeks later, following disaster upon disaster only three aircraft successfully returned to their home base. These calamities created a sudden and violent collapse of national security in the northeast United States in the weeks working up to the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

There are no heroes here, only hubris and tragedy, errors and death, with failures of command. In the years following came historical recriminations and amnesia.

The P-40 Tomahawks got off to an inauspicious start. Pilots turned back with mechanical issues, engine failure, and sickness. Boding ill for the coming tragedy, their C-47 tender with a ground crew of mechanics and technicians tasked with supporting the squadron was grounded with its own mechanical failures. It would have been better had they not but commanding officer Maj. Clayton Hughes and his Tomahawks flew on.

Nineteen of the 25 P-40s reached California. Then, on two separate occasions, the squadron was split into multiple fragments. Some suffered engine failure while others became lost in bad weather. In the course of one horrendous week four pilots were killed, crashing and burning. Remains of one of the dead pilots weren't discovered for 20 years. Four other pilots were forced to bail out over isolated mountainous terrain. Their survival was epic. A further three pilots were injured, with an additional nine other aircraft destroyed or rendered inoperable.

Lacking maps and situational awareness and improper clothing for the trial of errors they faced, the pilots struggled to confront the immediate challenges of their horrible situation. Most had received their wings within the previous six months so could not be considered well-trained nor experienced pilots.

Previous writers have written about this "Day it Rained P-40s." They will tell you the group's commander, a 1929 West Point graduate, was a man of limited leadership ability. He's accused of stubbornness in owning up to mistakes. Certainly Maj. Hughes deserves responsibility for what happened since he was in command. Yet, for the tenor of the times what occurred over California was neither unusual nor uncommon. Accidents happened and pilots were killed. Did Hughes exhibit poor leadership? Incompetence? Or was it bad weather or bad luck?

How best to approach a historical "certainty? Start with a clean slate and don't assume you know anything. There is no room for hindsight. You must live in their moment and treat the evidence as it was in that moment, in that year, and by those investigators. From there, build your case. By putting aside preconceived notions I can approach the issue with flesh perspective. That's how this story of US Army aviation will be presented, probed, and investigated in *Command Failure: US Army Air Forces Aviation and its Worst Peacetime Disaster*.

One other thing. This is more than a book about airplane crashes and the failure of command. Chapters will also delve into cogent topics such as how the term World War II was invented, the characteristics of the P-40 Tomahawk making it susceptible to engine failure, whether folly and incompetence lead to disaster, the acceptance of the era in training accidents and pilot deaths, and how the mentality of fighter pilots contributed to what happened in those weeks before Pearl Harbor.

My book proposal for *Command Failure* is attached. I plan a 65,000-75,000 word non-fiction popular history book. It will contain up to 20 chapters with references, chapter endnotes, and appendixes. A completed MS with maps, photographs and captions, can be submitted within 24 months or less of project acceptance.

Sincerely,

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