

HAWAIIAN HEROES:
AMERICA'S FIRST BATTLE OF THE PACIFIC WAR

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Ni'ihau: The Forbidden Isle. For most, I myself included, this tropical paradise is nothing more than a mystery seventeen miles from the shoreline of the Hawaiian Island of Kaua'i. For others, it is a short-lived and very expensive once-in-a-lifetime getaway. Yet, for a few, Ni'ihau is both home and a way of life that dates back to the early years of the Hawaiian Monarchy. To this day, Ni'ihau remains off-limits to visitors unless permission is granted by its proprietors, the Robinson Family. Not even the celebrity status of rock star Mick Jagger is enough to garner this prestigious consent.¹ From time-to-time, numerous foreigners, including mariners, missionaries, and even crew members of Captain Cook's *Endeavour*, have innocently landed upon the island's beaches. In 1941, however, the welfare of this tiny island's population was tested for the first time with the crash-landing of a Japanese pilot following the Pearl Harbor raid.² This event would later become known as the "The Battle of Ni'ihau."

Ni'ihau is the westernmost island of the Hawaiian chain. Measuring eighteen miles long and six miles wide, it is inhabited by Native Hawaiians who live in isolation as ranchers and farmers. Ni'ihau was property of the Hawaiian Monarchy until it was sold by King Kamehameha V to the Sinclair Family in 1864.³ The Sinclairs settled in, and although Ni'ihau was now the possession of *haoles*, the island's livelihood remained unaffected. Custody of Ni'ihau was eventually passed to Aubrey Robinson, grandson of Eliza Sinclair – one of the island's original procurers. Although Aubrey steadily reduced the number of Ni'ihau's occupants, he never altered the operation.⁴ Even through changing times and technological advancements, Ni'ihau's neolithic roots endured.

¹ Michael Harris, "Weekend Window to Niihau, Hawaii's 'Forbidden Island,'" *ABC News*, October 1, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/WeekendWindow/hawaiiis-forbidden-island-weekend-window-niihau/story?id=11767576> (accessed November 28, 2012).

² Ruth M. Tabrah, *Niihau: The Last Hawaiian Island* (Kailua, HI: Press Pacifica, 1987), 9.

³ Edward Joesting, *Kauai: The Separate Kingdom* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 192.

⁴ Tabrah, *Niihau: The Last Hawaiian Island*, 131.

Following Aubrey's passing in 1936, the family operation fell to his son, Aylmer. Aylmer Robinson, the island's new superintendent, chose not to live on Ni'ihau but rather on neighboring Kaua'i, and commute weekly via sampan.⁵ When Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, Aylmer was at home on Kaua'i, and lacking radio communication, was unable to notify the Ni'ihauans. Also, in the aftermath of the raid, the Hawai'i Naval Commander ordered all boats off the water, meaning Aylmer would have to wait for approval to sail to Ni'ihau.⁶ With no knowledge of the attack on Oahu or the looming war with the Japanese, Ni'ihau's residents continued living their conventional lives.

During the planning stages of the Pearl Harbor attack, a contingency for disabled aircraft was studied by Imperial Navy Commander Mitsuo Fuchida. With great consideration, Fuchida declared that Ni'ihau's flat terrain and low populous would make it a favorable site for impaired planes to ditch. The Imperial Navy would then dispatch a submarine to the coast for crew rescue. As it turned out, *I-74*, the submarine tasked with this operation was called away to support the Oahu raid well before any Japanese fighters neared the Ni'ihau coastline.⁷ Had this not occurred, The Battle of Ni'ihau may have been nothing more than a brush with paradise.

Imperial Navy First Air Petty Officer Shigenori Nishikaichi was an airman from the Japanese Carrier *Hiryū*. His squadron, commanded by Lieutenant Sumio Nōno, was part of the second wave set to attack Kaneohe Naval Air Station and Bellows Field.⁸ Nōno's squadron of Zeros departed *Hiryū* at 7:15AM and successfully executed its mission over southeastern Oahu.⁹ As the Zeros maneuvered for return to the carriers, they were met with American resistance and

⁵ Tabrah, *Niihau: The Last Hawaiian Island*, 140.

⁶ "Here Is The Official Version of The Niihau 'Incident,'" *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 18, 1941.

⁷ Mitsuo Fuchida, *For That One Day: The Memoirs of Mitsuo Fuchida, Commander of the Attack on Pearl Harbor*, trans. Douglas T. Shinsato and Tadanori Urabe (Hawaii: eXperience Inc., 2011), 292.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁹ Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumiya, *Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan, the Japanese Navy's Story* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 54.

a dogfight ensued.¹⁰ During the altercation, Nishikaichi's plane was struck six times, including one direct hit to his fuel tank. Damaged but still maintaining altitude, Nishikaichi navigated his plane to the meeting point. He arrived at 10:00AM but no other Japanese fighters were to be seen. Disheartened, he continued flying westward, where he was eventually joined by another Zero also damaged during the raid; this piloted by Airman 2nd Class Saburo Ishii.¹¹ Nishikaichi figured that if they could make it to Ni'ihau Island, they could later rendezvous with the rescue submarine.

As the planes neared Ni'ihau and reduced altitude, Nishikaichi viewed houses along the western coast of the island. Looking closer, he observed natives making their way to church. These were the residents of Ni'ihau's village, Pu'uwai.¹² While Nishikaichi scanned the plains for a safe place to land, the other Zero pilot chose rather to return to Oahu. Shortly after banking east, Ishii's plane, already low on fuel, dove sharply and crashed into the ocean. Nishikaichi was once again alone.¹³

It was after 1:00 PM when Shigenori Nishikaichi angled his aircraft into its final descent towards an open pasture near Pu'uwai.¹⁴ By this time, the inhabitants had been well aware of the distressed plane flying overhead. One of the villagers even identified the markings on the aircraft as Japanese.¹⁵ Just as the Zero was about to touch down, its landing gear caught a wire fence, ripping it from the fuselage. The plane dug into the hard soil, knocking Nishikaichi unconscious before coming to rest.¹⁶ Observing the crash from his ranch house was Howard

¹⁰ Fuchida, *For That One Day*, 293.

¹¹ Allan Beekman, *The Niihau Incident* (Honolulu, HI: Heritage Press of the Pacific, 1982), 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ William Hallstead, "The Niihau Incident," *World War II*, January 2000, 38.

¹⁴ "Here Is The Official Version of The Niihau 'Incident.'"

¹⁵ Blake Clark, *Remember Pearl Harbor!* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Publishing Company, 1942), 194.

¹⁶ Hallstead, "The Niihau Incident."

Kaleohano. First to arrive on the scene, Kaleohano freed the comatose pilot and pulled him from the cockpit. He then searched the pilot, confiscating both his pistol and documents.¹⁷

Howard Kaleohano was not originally of Ni'ihau, but rather the Big Island. There, he was educated, then traveled to Ni'ihau in 1931 to visit his sister. Later, he acquired permission from Aylmer Robinson to remain on the island permanently as a ranch hand.¹⁸ Because of his education, Kaleohano was among the best English-speakers on Ni'ihau, which happened to be the language the pilot first spoke upon regaining consciousness. "Are you a Japanese?" Nishikaichi asked. "No, I am a Hawaiian," Kaleohano replied.¹⁹ The two conversed shortly, then Kaleohano brought the dazed aviator to his house where he was fed. Nishikaichi offered both Japanese money and cigarettes for the hospitality, but Kaleohano politely declined.²⁰

Needing an interpreter, Kaleohano called upon Ishimatsu Shintani. Shintani moved to Hawai'i from Japan in 1900 and shortly thereafter relocated to Ni'ihau where he was employed as a beekeeper. Shintani married a native Ni'ihauan and together they raised three children.²¹ Although his children were eligible for US Citizenship, his wife was stripped of hers and he was restricted because he was an *issei*, or first-generation Japanese immigrant.²² Therefore, Shintani was hesitant to fulfill the request to translate for the pilot. He spoke with Nishikaichi only momentarily before hastily departing. Since Shintani was of no use to Kaleohano, he sought the assistance of the Haradas.

¹⁷ "Here Is The Official Version of The Niihau 'Incident.'"

¹⁸ Edward R Stepien, "Niihau: A Brief History, Part I" (M.A. Thesis, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1984), 63.

¹⁹ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 39.

²⁰ Burt Burlgame, "The One-Week War of Niihau Island," *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 7, 1986.

²¹ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 40.

²² Yukiko Kimura, *Issei. Japanese Immigrants in Hawaii*, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).

Yoshio Harada was born on the island of Kaua'i in 1903.²³ Being a *nisei*, or second-generation Japanese immigrant, he was awarded citizenship with his birth; however, his parents were barred because of their ancestry.²⁴ Early in his 30's, Yoshio married Irene Tanaka, the Hawai'i-born daughter of Japanese immigrants. In 1939, the Haradas were contracted by Aylmer Robinson to work on Ni'ihau for a period of five years. Once settled in, life was simple, as Irene managed the general store and Yoshio worked as a beekeeper.²⁵ This all changed the day they were summoned to Howard Kaleohano's house. Following introductions, the pilot and Haradas spoke extensively in Japanese; at which point Nishikaichi explained his situation, detailing Japan's raid on Oahu and how he crash-landed on Ni'ihau. Not wanting to jeopardize their status with the Hawaiians, the Haradas kept the disclosure to themselves.²⁶ At nightfall, Nishikaichi was treated to a luau by the residents. A large meal was served and music followed. Even though his rescue party was nowhere to be seen, Nishikaichi refused to surrender hope that it would show.²⁷

Aylmer Robinson was expected to arrive on December 8 as part of his weekly visit to Ni'ihau. Nishikaichi was transported from Pu'uwai village, north to Ki'i landing where he would be handed off for transfer to Kaua'i. The Hawaiians waited several hours but Aylmer never appeared. The next day, the pilot was again taken to Ki'i and still no Aylmer.²⁸ As his escorts pondered the fate of their caretaker, Nishikaichi questioned the absence of his rescue party. He grew frustrated and nervous, and his conversations with Yoshio Harada became more personal; speaking of Japan's growing empire and predicting victory over the United States in

²³ Hallstead, "The Ni'ihau Incident."

²⁴ Kimura, *Issei Japanese Immigrants in Hawaii*, xv.

²⁵ Beekman, *The Ni'ihau Incident*, 48-49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁷ Burlgame, "The One-Week War of Ni'ihau Island."

²⁸ Clark, *Remember Pearl Harbor!*, 197-198.

war. Nishikaichi knew if there was anyone on Ni'ihau he could win over, the Haradas were it. And knowing there was strength in numbers, Ishimatsu Shintani, too, was needed.²⁹

Before an offensive could be executed, Nishikaichi needed to destroy any intelligence that would endanger his homeland. This included both his confiscated documents and aircraft. Friday afternoon, December 12, Yoshio Harada instructed Shintani to confront Howard Kaleohano and obtain the pilot's papers.³⁰ Shintani arrived at Kaleohano's house and demanded the documents, claiming that he was going to destroy them. Kaleohano refused. Disturbed by the response, Shintani asked once more, this time offering \$200.³¹ Howard, again, turned down the request, and with no other alternative, Shintani stormed away.

Because Shintani had failed to peacefully recover the papers, a more forceful approach was needed. While Irene Harada kept the prisoner's chaperones entertained, Yoshio went to a neighboring home and removed two firearms, placing them in hiding outside a nearby warehouse. When he returned, Nishikaichi requested to use the bathroom and was escorted outside by Yoshio Harada and one other Ni'ihauan, Hanaiki Niau. Harada cleverly diverted the men to the warehouse, whereupon the traitors revealed the weapons then hastily locked Niau inside the building.³² Moments later, Niau's wife, Loisa, pulled up to the warehouse in her wagon. The two men angrily pointed the guns at her, and seizing the wagon, commanded she take them to Howard Kaleohano's house.³³

The earlier exchange with Shintani had left Howard Kaleohano anxious, so when the Japanese arrived at his front gate with arms, his suspicions of trouble were confirmed. As the

²⁹ Hallstead, "The Ni'ihau Incident."

³⁰ "Here Is The Official Version of The Ni'ihau 'Incident.'"

³¹ U.S. Congressional Joint Committee on Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, *Proceedings of the Roberts Commission*, Pt. 24, 1449, <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pha/misc/niihau.html> (accessed November 29, 2012).

³² Beckman, *The Ni'ihau Incident*, 61-62.

³³ Hallstead, "The Ni'ihau Incident."

two men made their way onto the property, Howard bolted over a lava wall, barely escaping a shotgun blast.³⁴ He ran straight to the village center to alert the residents of danger, then proceeded to Ni'iahu's highest peak, Mount Pani'au, to light a signal fire. With Kaleohano gone, the rebels ravaged his home in search of the documents.³⁵ Unsuccessful in their pursuit, they set both Kaleohano's house and the Japanese Zero ablaze, then proceeded to Pu'uwai.³⁶ There, Harada and Nishikaichi terrorized the residents as they searched for Howard. Wandering through the village in the early hours of the morning, they fired their weapons demanding he reveal himself. This led many frightened Ni'ihauans to seek shelter away from their homes into the thicket.³⁷

Just after midnight on Saturday, December 13, Howard Kaleohano had reached Mount Pani'au to find a signal fire already burning; this started by other concerned Ni'ihauans. Fearing this may not have been enough to alert the residents of Kaua'i, he suggested they instead sail to the island immediately.³⁸ He, along with five men, traversed to Ki'i landing and readied a craft for the transit. They embarked at 12:30 AM and paddled east towards the Garden Isle, landing on the shore of Waimea town 15 hours later.³⁹ The men were promptly taken to the Waimea Police Station where they contacted Aylmer Robinson. Aylmer arrived shortly thereafter and listened to Kaleohano described the situation.⁴⁰ Concerned for his residents, Aylmer alerted Kaua'i District Army Commander [Lieutenant Colonel] Eugene Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald requested

³⁴ Clark, *Remember Pearl Harbor!*, 203.

³⁵ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 63.

³⁶ U.S. Congressional Joint Committee on Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, 1450.

³⁷ Elama Kanahale, Kimo Armitage, and Keao NeSmith, ed. and trans., *Aloha Niihau: Oral Histories by Emalaia Licayan, Virginia Nizo, and Elama Kanahale* (Waipahu, HI: Island Heritage Publishing, 2007), 79.

³⁸ Rerioteria Tava and Moses K. Keale Sr, *Niihau: The Traditions of an Hawaiian Island* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Publishing Company, 1989), 54.

³⁹ U.S. Congressional Joint Committee on Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, 1450.

⁴⁰ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 71.

Lieutenant Jack Mizuha lead a band of soldiers to Ni'ihau. The expedition squad, along with Aylmer Robinson and the Ni'ihauans, departed Waimea at 6:00 PM Saturday evening.⁴¹

Back in Pu'uwai, the panic continued. By sunrise on Sunday morning, most of the inhabitants had fled the village. After daylight, however, in an attempt to secure rations for the now refugees, Ben and Ella Kanahele started back for their house.⁴² Their mission ended quickly as they were discovered by Harada and Nishikaichi and taken hostage. The Japanese pilot demanded Ben Kanahele help him search for Howard Kaleohano. Although Ben knew that Howard had left for Kaua'i earlier that morning, he agreed, fearing the safety of both him and his wife. Together they hunted for Howard, but as late morning neared, frustrations grew and patience wore thin.⁴³ It was then, in a moment of opportunity that Ben Kanahele chose to act against his aggressors.

During a weapons exchange between Harada and Nishikaichi, Ben Kanahele sprung at the pilot. As Nishikaichi raised his pistol to Ben, Ella seized his arm. Harada rushed over and pulled her away. Again, Nishikaichi aimed, and this time shot Ben three times. Injured and extremely angry, Ben took hold of Nishikaichi, lifted him into the air, and threw him into a lava rock wall.⁴⁴ With the pilot lying on the ground unconscious, Ella took a large rock and repeatedly struck it against his head.⁴⁵ Then, to ensure Nishikaichi's death, Ben Kanahele sliced his throat with a hunting knife. Watching these events unfold, Harada knew he had no other

⁴¹ U.S. Congressional Joint Committee on Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, 1448.

⁴² Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 82.

⁴³ Clarice B. Taylor, "Japanese Pilot Killed On Niihau After Taking Isle," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 16, 1941.

⁴⁴ Laselle Gilman, "Once Isolated Niihau Greet's Army; Joins Nation's War Effort," *Honolulu Advertiser*, June 19, 1943.

⁴⁵ "Pilot Clubbed To Death By Hawaiian Pair," *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 16, 1941.

option but to take his own life. He pointed a shotgun at his stomach and pulled the trigger. Not accounting for the recoil, the first shot missed. Harada's second effort, however, proved fatal.⁴⁶

The expedition squad from Kaua'i arrived at Pu'uwai Sunday afternoon to find the incident under control and both men already dead and buried. After a series of questions, Ishimatsu Shintani and Irene Harada were both placed into custody and transported to Kaua'i.⁴⁷ Irene was later imprisoned on the island of O'ahu and Shintani sent to an internment camp on the US West Coast.⁴⁸ Novelist William Hallstead has argued that the disloyalty of both Shintani and the Haradas influenced the decision of the Roosevelt Administration to actively pursue internment of Japanese living in the United States.⁴⁹ Even if it did not directly impact Roosevelt's judgement, his administration was aware of the events that occurred on Ni'ihau island.⁵⁰ Following the War, Ben Kanahale was honored with the Medal of Merit and Purple Heart for his gallantry. Howard Kaleohano, too, was commended for his efforts with the Medal of Freedom.⁵¹ Although "The Battle of Ni'ihau" is sometimes overlooked in history books or classroom lectures on World War II, this great epic survives each generation of those residing on the "Forbidden Isle."

⁴⁶ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 83.

⁴⁷ U.S. Congressional Joint Committee on Pearl Harbor Attack Hearings, 1450.

⁴⁸ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 91.

⁴⁹ Hallstead, "The Niihau Incident."

⁵⁰ U.S. Naval Intelligence Service, Office of Naval Intelligence, Source File Number 14 ND, ONI File Number 1798, January 26, 1942.

⁵¹ Beekman, *The Niihau Incident*, 103-105.

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