A JAPANESE PILOT CRASHED ON A HAWAIIAN ISLAND. THE BIZARRE CHAIN OF EVENTS THAT FOLLOWED MAY HAVE INFLUENCED ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST REGRETTABLE ACTS.

Conflicted allegiances leading to a deadly confrontation on Niihau may have had far-reaching repercussions for Japanese Americans during World War II.

By **WILLIAM HALLSTEAD**
11/12/2000

After clipping a fence, Shigenori Nishikaichi and his Zero came to rest in a farmer's field where the pilot made an attempt to burn out the remains of his fighter. (National Archives)

By mid-morning, December 7, 1941, 22-year-old Airman 1st Class Shigenori Nishikaichi knew his Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighter was in serious trouble.

Flying escort for a flight of bombers from the Japanese aircraft carrier *Shokaku* during the attack on Pearl Harbor, Nishikaichi and seven other fighter pilots from the carrier *Hiryu* had attacked targets in southeastern Oahu. The fighters strafed the U.S. Naval Air Station on the Mokapu Peninsula and then hit Bellows Army Airfield, 10 miles to the south. In both attacks, bombing followed the strafing. The fighters then made another pass to hit additional targets of opportunity.

After the raids, the Zeros reassembled and began the return flight to the carriers. The plan was to rendezvous with returning bombers just north of Oahu's northern tip. The bombers would then lead the fighters — which had few navigation aids — back to the carriers waiting nearly 200 miles away. Before the Zeros neared the rendezvous point, however, a flight of nine American Curtiss P-36A fighters dived out of nowhere and a one-sided battle ensued. The lightly armed P-36As looked fierce, but they were already obsolete. The Zeros outclimbed, outturned and outran the slower, less maneuverable Curtisses. The American pilots went down one after the other, victims of the Zeros' superior maneuverability.

Airman 1st Class Shigenori Nishikaichi strikes a pose during flight training. (Historynet Archives)

In the aerial melee, Nishikaichi's fighter was hit, but at first the damage seemed superficial. As the Zeros regrouped, however, the pilot noticed an excessive rate of fuel consumption. In fact, one of the half-dozen hits on the plane had punctured its gas tank. The engine began to run rough, and Nishikaichi soon fell behind the others. By the time he reached the rendezvous area, he was alone. Then he spotted another Zero approaching, this one ominously trailing smoke.

STRICKEN PILOTS TOLD TO GO TO NIIHAU

During the morning briefing aboard *Hiryu*, the pilots had been told that crippled aircraft should attempt to make emergency landings on tiny Niihau, the westernmost of Hawaii's seven main islands. There, survivors were to wait along the coast for the arrival of an Imperial Navy *I*-class

submarine assigned to rescue duty. There would be no problems with locals on the island, they were assured, since Niihau was reportedly uninhabited.

Nishikaichi made a quick calculation based on his rate of fuel consumption and reduced airspeed caused by the now faltering engine. He decided that a try for Niihau, about 130 miles to the west, was more feasible than attempting to reach *Hiryu*, which probably would be steaming away from Hawaii and back toward Japan. With the other damaged Zero trailing behind, he turned due west.

To the west of Oahu, the tiny island of Niihau was thought to be uninhabited. (National Archives)

Twenty minutes later, the two limping Zeros passed to the south of Kauai's green slopes. After a few more minutes, Nishikaichi spotted dead ahead the lava cliffs on the east coast of 18-mile-long, 6-mile-wide Niihau. In tandem, the two faltering Japanese fighters circled the island.

At that point, Nishikaichi discovered that Japanese Intelligence had blown it. Contrary to the information he had received, the island was clearly inhabited. About a third of the way up the west coast was a large central building, along with several smaller structures. A mile or so beyond that was a small settlement, where he could see a cluster of people standing in front of what appeared to be a church. From his low altitude, Nishikaichi observed that the people appeared to be Polynesian natives.

In some confusion, Nishikaichi flew southwest, away from the island. The other plane followed. Then Nishikaichi faced the inevitable, realizing that he would have to either land on Niihau or

crash at sea. He slipped back toward the other plane and signaled its pilot to head back to the island.

The pilot of the other stricken Zero, Airman 2nd Class Saburo Ishii, waved away that suggestion. He had just radioed his carrier, *Shokaku*, that he intended to return to Oahu and crash-dive into some worthwhile target. A few minutes later, Nishikaichi watched Ishii climb steeply, then inexplicably dive straight into the sea.

NIIHAU DEEMED 'KAPU'

The shaken Japanese pilot turned toward Niihau and began looking for a place to land.

Nishikaichi soon discovered that whoever lived on Niihau had better prepared that small island for a possible war than the military authorities had on Oahu. With admirable foresight, Niihau's manager had ordered potential landing sites to be heavily plowed or studded with rock piles.

With his fuel almost gone, Nishikaichi finally found a relatively level, uncluttered stretch of pasture near an isolated house. He eased the Zero into a shallow approach glide and braced himself for a hard landing.

The island Nishikaichi was about to land on was strictly *kapu*, or forbidden, to any outside member of the public.

In 1864, King Kamehameha V had sold Niihau to the Robinson family, in whose hands it remained. The native Niihauans — and the Robinson family, for whom most of them work — were and still are a fiercely independent lot. In 1959, Niihau was the one out of Hawaii's 240 precincts to vote against statehood.

The predominantly native Hawaiian inhabitants herd sheep and cattle and gather honey, and they made the island famous through the export of highly prized jewelry made of tiny shells collected on the island's beaches. Humpbacked little Niihau — known throughout Hawaii as the "forbidden island" — has a very dry climate since most rainfall is intercepted by the towering mountains of Kauai, 17 miles to the east across the Kaulakahi Channel.

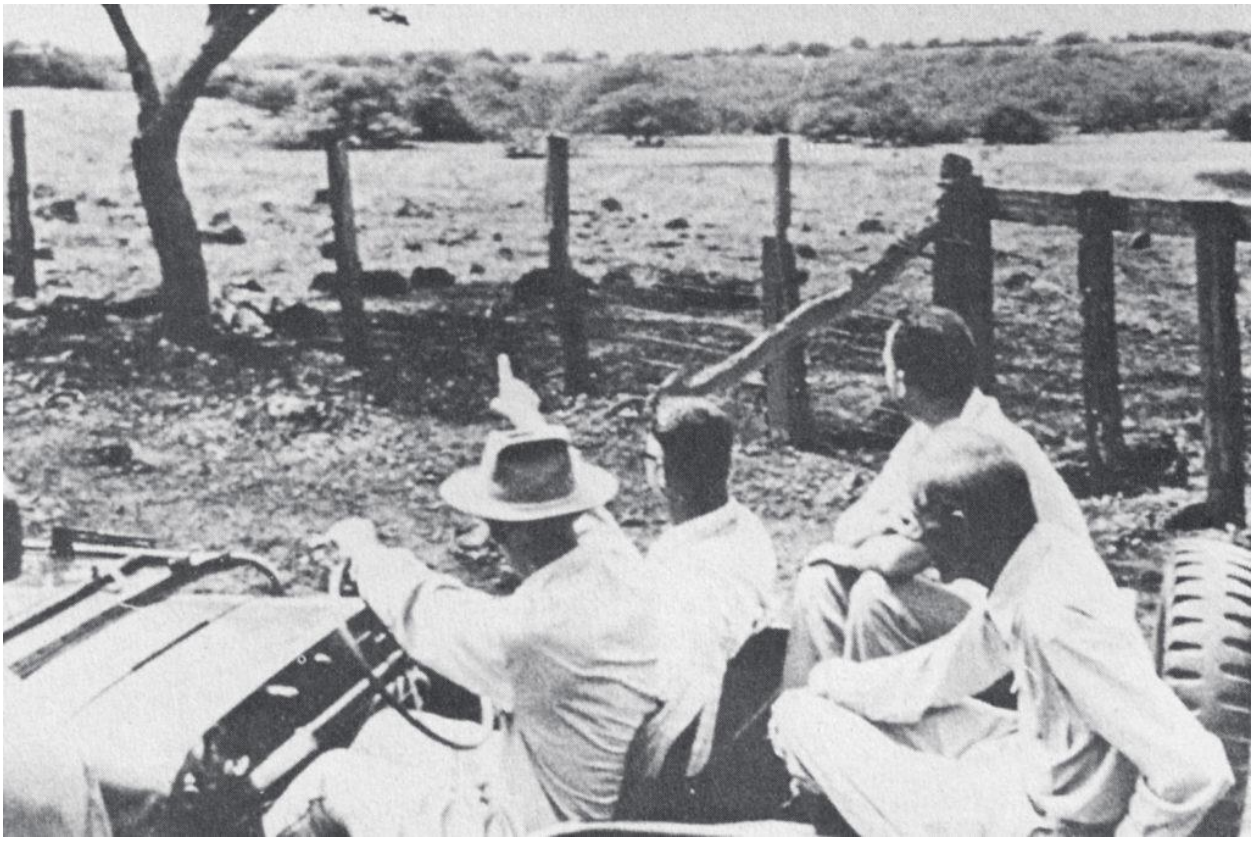
ZERO PILOT PULLED FROM WRECKAGE

As the Japanese pilot flared out for a landing in this benevolent private fiefdom, the Zero's wheels struck a wire fence, and the plane nosed in hard. Nishikaichi's safety harness tore loose, and he slammed against the instrument panel.

Watching the dramatic arrival of the sleek airplane with its red circle markings from his front yard was native Hawaiian Howard Kaleohano. Born and educated on the Big Island of Hawaii,

he had been permitted by island manager Aylmer Robinson to visit his sister on Niihau in 1930. He had stayed on and married, becoming one of the few native Hawaiians on the island who was fluent in English.

Kaleohano rushed to the crashed Zero, hauled the groggy pilot out of the wreckage and took away his sidearm and what looked like official papers. Speaking in schoolboy English, Nishikaichi asked Kaleohano if he was Japanese. “I am Hawaiian,” Kaleohano told him. He then took the pilot into his house, where his wife served the visitor breakfast.



Officials point out the crash site. (National Archives)

When it became evident that Nishikaichi’s limited English was of little use, Japanese-born Ishimatsu Shintani, a 60-year-old beekeeper, was summoned to help. When he arrived, the beekeeper was not at all happy about being asked to translate for the Japanese pilot. Shintani had lived in Hawaii for 41 years, and his children had been born there, so they were by birth American citizens. But Shintani himself was barred from U.S. citizenship by the law then applicable in the Territory of Hawaii.

With his own background in mind, Shintani was nervous about becoming involved in this unusual situation. After he and Nishikaichi spoke briefly, Shintani was seen to turn pale, as though he had received a shock. The beekeeper then left the house without relaying much useful information to Kaleohano. Clearly, Kaleohano needed to find someone else to help him.

Next summoned to the scene were the Haradas, who spoke both Japanese and English. Yoshio Harada, 38, had been born to Japanese parents on Kauai in 1903. His birth in Hawaii made him an American citizen, but he had three brothers in Japan, and his wife, Irene, had been born to Japanese parents. Speaking Japanese, Nishikaichi told the Haradas of the attack on Oahu. He also demanded that his pistol and documents be returned. Because the Haradas knew the Niihauans regarded them as more Japanese than Hawaiian, they kept what Nishikaichi had said to themselves.

That was the beginning of a sell-out that would cost them — as well as the nation — dearly.

NISHIKAICHI TREATED TO LUAU

Unaware that the United States was now at war with Japan, the Niihauans treated the pilot to a luau at a nearby house. Nishikaichi even sang a Japanese song at the gathering, accompanying himself on a borrowed guitar. He was probably wondering when the rescue submarine would arrive and send a shore party to escort him aboard. He was not going to be rescued by sub, however. A submarine had indeed been in the vicinity, but at 1:30 p.m. Hawaiian time, its commander had been ordered to sail on toward Oahu and intercept any incoming American relief ships.

By nightfall, word of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the other Oahu military installations had reached Niihau by radio. The pilot was questioned anew, and Yoshio Harada realized he had better accurately report what Nishikaichi had told him.

PILOT PLANS DEATH WITH HONOR

On Thursday, December 11, with the pilot still being treated as a guest, albeit not a very welcome one, Harada brought the beekeeper Shintani back into the picture. The three of them conferred privately at Harada's home, where Nishikaichi was then staying, and the following day, Shintani appeared at Howard Kaleohano's house and demanded the papers he had taken from the plane. Kaleohano refused to give them up. Shintani muttered a threat, and Kaleohano threw him out.

At that point, Harada and the pilot realized they could not count on the old beekeeper, but they were determined to proceed with Nishikaichi's newly chosen plan for himself — death with honor. By now, the pilot was under casual guard by several Niihauans.

That same day, Harada had stolen a shotgun and a pistol from the building near which the Zero had crashed — the Robinsons' ranch house, now unused and locked. Harada had been entrusted with a key. He loaded the firearms and took them to a warehouse used to store honey from the island's thriving beekeeping industry.

Returning home, Harada notified his wife and the pilot about the weapons he had secured. Only one of the four assigned guards was on duty at that point. When Nishikaichi asked to use the Haradas' outhouse, Harada accompanied him outside, followed by the guard. When the pilot emerged, Harada said he had something to attend to at the nearby honey warehouse. The unsuspecting guard accompanied them there. Thereupon Harada and Nishikaichi grabbed the hidden weapons and locked the guard in the warehouse.

Just then, the guard's wife appeared in a horse-drawn wagon. The two plotters commandeered the wagon and ordered the woman to drive them to Kaleohano's house, where they allowed the woman to flee on the horse. When they discovered that Kaleohano was not home, the pilot and Harada made a quick trip to the nearby downed plane, which was now guarded by a 16-year-old boy. Nishikaichi tried to work the radio, but to what purpose is uncertain. The two men then forced the young guard to go back to Kaleohano's house.

Now Kaleohano's apparent absence was explained when he suddenly rushed from his outhouse, where he had hidden in an effort to escape the armed duo. Harada leveled the shotgun and fired at him but missed. Being shot at settled Kaleohano's politics, and he managed to get away from Harada and Nishikaichi. He rushed to the village and warned the residents, then borrowed a horse and headed for the northern tip of the island, intending to build a signal fire. First, however, Kaleohano stopped at his now deserted house and picked up the plane's papers, which he took to his mother-in-law's home.

The guard who had been locked in the warehouse was able to escape at that point and dashed to the village, where he corroborated Kaleohano's earlier story. As a result, nearly all of the villagers fled to remote areas of the island.

WORD GETS TO NIIHAU LANDLORD

A bonfire had already been set on Mount Paniau, Niihau's highest point, by a group of alarmed men, but when Kaleohano arrived, he decided that relying only on signals was too chancy. Shortly after midnight, he and five others set off in a lifeboat from Kii Landing to Waimea, on Kauai, a 10-hour pull against the wind.

Robinson, who had learned about the signal fire and was chaffing under the travel prohibition, was astounded when he received a phone call from Kaleohano in Waimea. For several days, Robinson had been trying to get the commander of the Kauai Military District to send a boat to Niihau, but the Navy's ban on all boat traffic had frustrated his efforts. Now briefed by Kaleohano on the situation, Robinson finally received approval to organize a rescue mission.

Nishikaichi and Harada attempted to destroy the Japanese fighter and recover its machine guns. (National Archives)

In the meantime, Nishikaichi and Harada recaptured the escaped guard and forced him to walk through the deserted village, calling on any remaining inhabitants to come out of their houses. Only one man, Kaahakila Kalima, appeared, giving the renegades their second prisoner. They then returned to the plane, stripped off the Zero's machine guns and remaining ammunition and stowed them on a wagon. They also tried to burn the plane, but the fire they set in the cockpit did not spread. Harada sent Kalima to tell Irene that he would not be returning that night. Then he and the pilot — apparently drunk with power — walked through the now silent village firing their weapons and yelling for Kaleohano to surrender.

Once away from his captors, Kalima made for the beach, where he found his wife along with Ben Kanahele and Ben's wife. Kanahele, 49, was a 6-foot native Hawaiian sheep rancher, noted for his prodigious strength. Kalima and Kanahele managed to avoid Nishikaichi and Harada and removed the machine-gun ammo from the wagon. But when they and their wives attempted to return to the village for food, they were captured.

NIIHAUANS FIGHT BACK

After nightfall on December 12, Nishikaichi and Harada searched Kaleohano's house for the plane's papers, then burned it down in frustration. They then forced Ben Kanahele to search for Kaleohano. Kanahele, who knew that Kaleohano had left for Kauai, put on a show of calling for him.

Nishikaichi, now holding the shotgun and with the pistol stuck in his boot, told Kanahele that if he could not produce Kaleohano, he and all the others on the island would be shot. The placid Niihauans were normally slow to anger, but by this time the islanders had had enough. Speaking Hawaiian, Ben Kanahele demanded that Harada take away the pilot's pistol. Harada refused, but he indicated to Nishikaichi that he needed the shotgun.

Ben Kanahele (right) and his wife, Ella proved to be the end of the line for Nishikaichi. The ensuing struggle ended the pilot's hold on the island. (National Archives)

As the pilot handed over the gun, Kanahele and his wife lunged at him. Nishikaichi was too quick for them. He yanked the pistol from his boot and shot Kanahele in the chest, hip and groin. Enraged, the big Hawaiian grabbed the pilot, hoisted him in the air and threw him against a nearby stone wall. Grabbing a rock, Kanahele's wife began to bash the fallen pilot's head. Kanahele then drew a knife and slit Nishikaichi's throat. Harada, no doubt realizing that he had abetted a disastrous chain of events, jammed the shotgun muzzle into his own gut and pulled the trigger.

When an Army rescue party from Kauai finally arrived the following morning, it seemed that the remarkable episode was over. But that was not the end of the story.

FAR REACHING CONSEQUENCES

Ben Kanahele recovered from his wounds. In August 1945, he was awarded two presidential citations, the Medal of Merit and the Purple Heart.

For his peripheral part in the Niihau incident, Ishimatsu Shintani was taken into custody and interned on the U.S. mainland throughout the war. He blamed Japan more than the United States for his actions. With the postwar repeal of racial barriers to immigration, he became a naturalized American citizen in 1960.

Irene Harada lost not only her husband but also her freedom. Thought to be a Japanese spy, she was jailed on Kauai on December 15, 1941. She was transferred to a military prison on Oahu, where she was reportedly questioned but held her silence. Irene was released in late 1944 and returned to Niihau, embittered for life.

The actions of Shintani and the Haradas, all Niihauans of Japanese ancestry, were noted in a January 1942 Navy report as indications of the "likelihood that Japanese residents previously believed loyal to the United States may aid Japan."

With the nation in an uproar over the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, there can be no doubt that the Niihau event influenced the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to summarily remove more than 100,000 persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast and intern them in the U.S. interior.

In Hashihama, Japan, the hometown of young pilot Shigenori Nishikaichi, there is a stone column that was erected in his honor. Chiseled in granite is a version of his exploits over Oahu that claims he died "in battle." Also engraved there are the words: "His meritorious deed will live forever."

This article was written by William Hallstead and originally appeared in the November 2000 issue of World War II magazine.

https://www.historynet.com/niihau-incident/ 1-31-23