Air and Space this Week Item of the Week

TWO IMPORTANT MILITARY AVIATION DAYS THIS WEEK

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KEY WORDS: Darwin Butch O'Hare Carrier Raids Rabaul

The months after the attack on Pearl Harbor lived up to Admiral Yamamoto's statement to his superiors before the attack, that he expected Japanese forces to "run wild" in the Southwest Pacific, for at least six months, but then after that, he wasn't so sure. Midway proved him right. But those six months were a tough time for the Allies. Two events this week have their 80th anniversaries: the Japanese aerial attack on Darwin, an advanced base on Australia's north coast, and an act of valor during an aborted raid on the former Australian base, now in Japanese hands, at Rabaul, on New Britain Island.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Pearl Harbor attack did not live up to Japanese expectations, because the Pacific-based aircraft carriers were not in port that fateful day and the Japanese were not able to <u>destroy the naval fuel tank</u> farm. The goal was to damage the U.S. Navy in the Pacific badly enough to allow the Japanese to capture oil, rubber, tin, phosphorus, and other valuable military commodities in the Southwest Pacific region and secure them sufficiently to deter any later attempt by the Navy to take them back.

The Navy knew that trouble was brewing in the Pacific, and began moving to re-enforce American advanced bases at Midway Island, Wake Island, and the Philippines. But there were few aviation assets available. The carrier *Enterprise* was tasked to take 12 Marine fighters to Wake Island, departing Pearl on November 27. The planes were delivered successfully on December 4; the mission kept *Enterprise* away from Pearl in the attack that came two days later (International Date Line!).

The aircraft carrier *Lexington* was also sent on a re-enforcement mission, this time with 18 Vought SB2U-3 Vindicator scout bombers (derisively called "Wind Indicators" by their pilots, unimpressed with their combat capabilities) to Midway Island. They, too, would soon be fodder, but the mission also kept *Lexington* away from Pearl on the 7th. Her fighter complement was still flying biplanes (!), the Brewster F2A Buffalo. The third Pacific-based carrier was the *Lexington*'s sister, the *USS Saratoga*, undergoing a refit at Bremerton.

Little else could be accomplished immediately with the forces at hand. The *Enterprise* and *Lexington* were on the lookout for Japanese forces during the airplane delivery missions, dodging a few desultory submarine torpedoes, but most of the action was planning and

logistical. The Navy moved quickly to strengthen the supply line to Australia, building infrastructure such as the refueling station on Bora-Bora, and to generate attack plans, first small-scale carrier attacks on Japanese outer bases in the Mashall Islands, then a larger attack against the large base at Rabaul, then an attack at the advanced bases at Lae and Salamaua then the Doolittle bombing attack on the Japanese home islands.

Japanese victories came like a blizzard. They captured a number of positions in the Gilbert Islands on December 8. The U.S. base at Guam was captured on December 10. The British warships *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* were sunk by aerial attack alone on that same day. Attacks began on Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya, Borneo, and other places. The Dutch and Australians were in retreat pretty much everywhere. The Battle of the Java Sea ended the battle life of the American British Dutch Australian Command in late February. The oil and other resources of what is now Indonesia were almost entirely under Japanese control.

Chaos reigned in the Pacific as defensive forces were chewed up. Civilians panicked and fled as best they could. Attempts to destroy facilities rather than let them fall to the invaders untouched met with mixed success. There was only one bright spot, but alas, it didn't last long.

The beleaguered garrison at Wake Island faced a serious invasion attempt. A series of bombing attacks from Marshall Island bases destroyed 8 of the 12 Wildcat fighters delivered by the *Enterprise*, but most of the island's defensive weapons remained intact. Naval ships shelled the small island heavily on December 10, then launched an amphibious assault the following day. The few planes and pilots fought like tigers, and Henry Elrod even managed to sink a Japanese destroyer and shoot down two attacking planes. Another destroyer was sunk by shore-based artillery. The invasion was repulsed.

The Japanese withdrew, licked their wounds, and then would come roaring back, this time with the support of the carriers *Soryū* and *Hiryū* and more-powerful surface ships.

The Department of the Navy reacted to all of this by ordering the movement of the carriers *Yorktown, Hornet,* and *Wasp* from the Atlantic to the Pacific, leaving only the carrier *Ranger* in the Atlantic. The three carriers would not be in position for a number of weeks, but they would make their presence more than known later in the year.

Admiral Kimmel had planned a re-enforcing mission, built around the *Saratoga*, which would bring in more planes, and the seaplane tender *Tangier*, which would bring in troops, ammo, and a radar system that would provide early warning of incoming raids. Three cruisers and eight destroyers would escort them. However, Kimmel was relieved of command at Pearl on December 17. Admiral Nimitz would replace him on December 31. Meanwhile Vice Admiral William Pye served in an interim role, and he saw his primary mission as preserving Navy assets (not as craven as it sounds – but some would vigorously disagree).

The relief ships sailed from Pearl on December 14, under the overall command of Rear Admiral Jack Fletcher. The American radio intercept/cryptography team was in operation, but not at the level it would a few months later prior to Midway. They radio traffic analysis correctly

showed that the Wake invaders now had carrier support, more power than the re-enforcement convoy could withstand without significant loss.

The relief ships proceeded at the pace of their slowest ship, the convoy oiler. As they approached Wake, Pye received a report that the carriers suspected to be getting close to Wake also had battleship support (in actuality, there were two heavy cruisers, but no battleships), and that they would be in position to attack the island on December 23.

To continue the relief mission to save the gallant Wake defenders would have been a bold statement of courage, but also would likely result in heavy losses, and would not be likely to save Wake or its defenders. On December 23, Pye ordered the relief convoy to return to Pearl.

Admiral Nimitz wanted to force the Japanese to defend their bases in the Marshall Islands rather than allow them to support advances farther south and west, so he sent Admiral Halsey's *Enterprise* to raid bases at Kwajalein, Maleolap, and Wotje atolls, and have her escorts bombard bases at the latter two.

The shift of the three Atlantic carriers to the Pacific was a good thing, because the *Saratoga* would take a submarine torpedo on January 11, which forced her return to Bremerton for substantial repairs.

The *Yorktown* arrived in time to join *Enterprise* on the Marshall and Gilbert Island raids on February 1. *Yorktown* planes hit Wotje, causing damage to facilities while taking no losses. The story was a bit different at Taroa, where the American Wildcats, carrying small bombs, encountered three hastily-scrambled "Claude" fighters, older planes with fixed landing gear. Lieutenant Wilbur E. Rawie snuck up on one from behind and downed it, then chased another before turning it into a head-on run. Both pilots fired as they approached, neither wanting to turn away. The collided, and the Claude got the worst of the bargain, and immediately crash landed. Rawie's plane was damaged, but he returned to his carrier without further ado. He was the first U.S. Navy pilot to score and air-to-air victory in the War.

While all the above was going on, Australia was moving to re-enforce its defenses against the Japanese onslaught. They, too, were facing logistics and manpower problems, and were lost their bases at Rabaul on New Britain, Kavieng on New Ireland, and Lae, Salamaua, Buna, and Gona on New Guinea. Their large base, Port Moresby, on the southern coast of New Guinea was threatened. The forward base at Darwin, on the northern coast of Australia was one of the primary shipping transit points for supplies.

The attacks on the Marshall and Gilbert Islands didn't help that much, but they did give the Navy considerable experience in conducting carrier operations, at the cost of 11 planes.

The Saratoga's air group remained in Hawai'i while the Saratoga went off to Bremerton for repairs, helping the Army fly reconnaissance patrols to prevent any further surprise attacks. When the Lexington returned from the aborted Wake Island relief mission, her fighters went ashore where they were replaced by planes modern enough to need only two wings. The Saratoga fighter squadron replaced them in time for the next foray, a covering a supply convoy to Canton Island, scheduled to arrive there on February 12. On the way, they got orders to

move to the southwest Pacific and join ANZAC naval forces to protect the areas north of Australia. Their first task was to escort a shipment of troops heading to New Caledonia, after which they would strike at the major base at Rabaul, scheduled for February 21.

Rabaul was a much larger base than the Marshall Island bases just raided. The Japanese had been working hard to beef up its defenses for several weeks, and there two naval air groups there, comprising fighters, long-range medium bombers (code named "Betty"), and several long-range Kawanishi flying boats, which would fly standing long-range patrols. They would detect that advancing Allied attack forces on February 20. Ship radar allowed fighters to be vectored toward the snoopers. Two were shot down, but surprise was lost.

Detection at that stage would not only fully alert the Rabaul defenses, it would also give ample time for any ships in Rabaul's large harbor to up anchor and flee to a safer location. The attack force had enough fuel to conduct the strike as planned, but not enough if an extended high-speed withdrawal would be required. The presence of the strike force would accomplish the mission part about diverting Japanese forces, so the force commander aborted the attack, and prepared to defend against any long-range bombing attack from Rabaul. Good thing he did, but first

JAPANESE ATTACK ON DARWIN, AUSTRALIA

The Japanese had already captured Ambon, Borneo, and the northern Celebes by mid-February, and their push for Timor and Java were imminent. They had conducted an aerial reconnaissance of Darwin on February 10, finding America's first aircraft carrier, the *USS Langley*, five destroyers, and a number of support ships there. The forces and supplies at Darwin were an obstacle to their advance, so the Japanese staged a two-stage heavy attack on the town on **February 19**. The *Langley* had already departed for Trincomalee, and would be sunk *en route*, but a number of ships were still in the harbor on the 20th.

Four Japanese aircraft carriers, the *Kaga*, *Akagi*, *Soryū*, and *Hiryū*, all Pearl Harbor veterans (and later, Midway casualties) were approaching. The launched a 188-plane attack wave against Darwin, led by Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, who had also led the Pearl Harbor attack. As with Pearl Harbor, there were warnings that a raid was coming in, but they were ignored by local commanders. A few P-40 fighters were aloft, but Darwin was not on alert, when the planes descended and started tearing up the place. More bombs were dropped on Darwin than were on Pearl.

All but one of the defensive fighters were shot down or destroyed on the ground. Three warships and six freighters were sunk outright, including the American destroyer *Peary*. One freighter, laden heavily with bombs, was stupidly moored at Darwin's main wharf. It blew up spectacularly, causing serious damage to dock facilities. The Japanese lost a total of maybe 5 planes but only three crews, one of which was downed by the only surviving P-40.

But wait, there was more! A second wave, comprising 54 land-based bombers, a mixture of "Nells" and "Bettys," came in two hours after the carrier planes attacked. The first attack had

focused on shipping in the harbor, the bombers' objective was to destroy the military airfield and supporting shore facilities, and they were successful in causing a great deal of damage. As the case at Pearl Harbor, the defenders were caught flat-footed at what should not have come as a surprise. There were some examples of exceptional bravery. There were 11 oil storage tanks at Darwin, almost as vital as those at Pearl Harbor. The Japanese did not want to make the same mistake they did at Pearl, and specifically targeted the tanks for destruction. They did get seven of them, but a stout defense by an anti-aircraft gun emplacement saved the rest.

Many of the targets of the attack were warships, transport ships carrying troops and supplies, military aircraft, and the airfield; all legitimate military targets. However...

Australians became even more angry at the Japanese over actions they took against targets that should have been off-limits. A well-marked hospital ship anchored in the harbor took a bomb hit. A number of ships in the harbor had been loading civilians for evacuation when the attack came. Lifeboats with many women and children tried to reach shore, but were strafed. The Darwin hospital was hit, too, although in the pictures I could find I could see no obvious markings such as the red crosses easily-seen on the hospital ship. Combined with the atrocities to come on the Bataan Death March and the murder of civilians on Wake Island and nuns and missionaries in New Guinea, plus a dose of racism, the Allies took a much, much harsher stance against the Japanese than they did the other Axis members. When senior commanders at Guadalcanal saw wounded Japanese soldiers try to kill the medics tending to them, they were shocked. But the troops weren't; it was now no quarter asked or given.

Most people in Darwin after the raid were convinced that an invasion was imminent, so they bugged out. Looting was widespread; why leave anything of value for the Japanese?

But the invasion never came. Stout defense in New Guinea saved Port Moresby, and then the tide began to turn. Yamamoto was too optimistic with his "six months" prediction.

BUTCH O'HARE DEFENDS THE LEXINGTON

Pilots and front-line aircraft were rare in the south Pacific in the first half of 1942. Carriers did make desultory attacks on outer Japanese bases in the Marshalls and Gilberts, but both the Americans and Australians were rocked back on their heels, as partially described above. New aircraft were in the prototype stage, and planning was well underway for the Doolittle bombing strike against the Japanese home islands, but the tide was only beginning to turn.

The torpedoing of the carrier *Saratoga* was a blow, but there was a silver lining. Her air group, especially her fighters (VF-3), were left at Oahu. They were finally able to get up to full strength, getting new Wildcats and undergoing intensive pilot training.

The *Lexington* was returning to Pearl after her raids. VF-3, led by the redoubtable John Thach, was ordered to swap places with *Lexington*'s VF-2, and then steam out join TF-8 for a patrol around Canton and covering a troop convoy to New Caledonia. The task force (TF-11) built around *Lexington*, under command of Vice Admiral Wilson Brown, departed Pearl on January 31. In mid-February, VAdm Brown proposed that his TF-11 conduct a raid against the large

base at Rabaul; senior command was very concerned about the pace of Japanese advances in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and they quickly agreed. Several ships were transferred around, resulting in TF-11's escort ultimately comprising four heavy cruisers and ten destroyers. They would be supported by long-range scouting by PBYs and B-17s out of Suva.

The benefits of attacking Rabaul were two-fold: first, to damage the military capacity of the base, and two, to cause the Japanese to divert resources needed elsewhere to Rabaul.

The Japanese at Rabaul were hardly idle at this time. In addition to building up the facilities at Rabaul, they conducted long-range patrolling with their Kawanishi four-engine flying boats. TF-11 had air-search radar, the Japanese did not.

Brown's plan was for *Lex*'s aircraft to conduct a substantial hit-and-run raid, and success hinged on being able to get close enough to Rabaul before launching the raid to allow all her attack aircraft to participate. As they approached Rabaul, radar starting picking up the Kawanishi scouts. Fighters were vectored out to shoot the scouts down before they could sight TF-11 or report that they were being attacked by carrier-based planes. Thach's fighters were able to shoot two down, but the report of their presence got through.

It was **February 20, 1942**, a day after the Darwin raid. The time of the attack was almost a day away. VAdm Brown knew that the Japanese would have enough time to get the cargo ships out of Rabaul harbor before the attack, and that defensive forces would be fully alert. The *Lexington* was a very valuable asset, especially with the *Saratoga* out of action for a while. Brown properly considered continuing with the raid was no longer worth the risk, and began to withdraw, even though *Lexington*'s captain urged to go on. Brown decided to turn directly toward Rabaul and approach, to make the Japanese certain an American carrier lurked nearby and coming in, then withdraw, thereby ensuring a diversion of Japanese attention to Rabaul instead of elsewhere. He was confident Thach's fighters could defend against the ungainly Kawanishi aircraft, should the Japanese decide to mount a long-range attack.

VAdm Brown was unaware of the flying characteristics of the new Mitsubishi Type 1 bomber, which would be code-named "Betty" by the Allies. Designers had sacrificed much in its design to give it extraordinary range and still carry a torpedo or several bombs. The Betty had no protective armor for engines or crew, very large fuel tanks with no self-sealing capability, and had limited gun protection, apart from a 20mm cannon tail gun. The Japanese nicknamed the Betty, the "Flying Cigar" because of the shape of the fuselage, but it wasn't too long after this fight that our guys started calling it the "Cigar Lighter" because it so readily burst into flame when hit.

Subsequent reconnaissance by the Japanese did confirm TF-11's presence and composition, and that it was too far away to launch a full attack. The only aircraft that could reach the withdrawing Americans and cause significant damage were the squadron of Bettys that had recently arrived at Rabaul. The Japanese launched 18 Bettys, in two groups of nine, without fighter escort. One of the bombers aborted due to mechanical problems; the others moved out aggressively, separating along the way in order to be able to attack from two directions.

American radar was pretty primitive, an "A Scope," compared to the "Position Plan Indicator" models that would become available later in the War. But they were good enough to register the closer of the two groups, nine attacking bombers. Most of VF-3 was vectored out at them, but the flight director, seeing hints of an additional radar return, held two fighters in reserve, just in case.

VF-3 had a field day against the unescorted bombers, and two *Lexington* dive bombers even got into the act by downing two of them (already damaged). All nine Bettys of the first group were destroyed. Two Wildcats were shot down, but one of the pilots would be rescued later. While that was going on, the second radar signal firmed up; there was another group of bombers inbound, and VF-3 was not in a position to counter them. The two reserve VF-3 planes were piloted by Edward Henry "Butch" O'Hare, and his wingman, Marion Dufilho. They were all that stood between the oncoming group of eight bombers and TF-11.

And stood they did, at least O'Hare. The two Wildcat pilots roared off, testing their guns as they approached the bombers. Dufilho's guns were jammed (a common problem with the early Wildcat); he pulled up to try to clear his guns and rejoin the fray. O'Hare was alone.

O'Hare was one of the best shots in the squadron, and he proved it that day. The bombers were descending rapidly to attack height as they approached. O'Hare set up a high-side run on a bomber in the rear of the formation. His primary goal was to break up the attack, rather than stay with a target until its destruction was assured. He knew the engines were vulnerable, so he planned to focus on one of them on each plane.

O'Hare hit his first target, and knocked out one engine with a few short bursts. It fell away, badly damaged and would later be shot down trying to get back to Rabaul. O'Hare then made a run from the other side of the formation. The result was the same, engine damage and leaving the formation, but this plane would not only recover, catch up, and continue the attack, it would actually make it home. Butch was able to continue this run, and knocked out a third bomber, again by taking out an engine.

The high-side attacks required defensive gunners to have only fleeting shots, requiring a lot of "lead," and so far, he hadn't been hit. But the attackers were now getting close to TF-11, so close that anti-aircraft fire began against the bombers. O'Hare knew that Japanese bombers often dropped under the visual guidance of the lead bombardier, so he ignored the "friendly" AAA and made a third run, this time at the lead aircraft to render the coming drop less accurate. He fired into its left engine, and blew it completely out of its mounts and off the bomber. Down it went. But not out.

The four remaining bombers were close to the drop point when the lead aircraft went down. They dropped right away and didn't miss the *Lexington* by much; the closest bomb hit only 100 feet away from her hull. Only two of them would make it back to base, and one of those was too badly damaged to fly again.

Seventeen bombers went out, only two returned. No bomb hit any American ship. Butch O'Hare rightfully thought he had shot down five aircraft. Two of those he hit went straight

down, another was in full retreat, slowly because of battle damage, when it was shot down by on SBD, and a fourth was damaged, but returned to the attack group, dropped, and then made it back to base. The fifth, the leader of the eight, the one missing an entire engine, was fatally damaged, but not quite out of the fight yet.

The bombers attacking TF-11 were not kamakazes; they fully intended to return to Rabaul. However, it was not unknown for a plane/pilot, damaged beyond the ability to return, would choose to crash into their tormentors and "take as many of them with them as possible." The leader of the group of eight certainly had that philosophy. His aircraft was missing an engine and likely had other serious, but less visible, damage. He and his crew may have also been hit. In any case, he chose to crash into the *Lexington*, and he almost made it. He came up from astern, and every gun that could bear on his Betty was firing away. He crashed in flames alongside.

The *Lexington* would be sunk at the Battle of the Coral Sea on May 8. Marion Dufilho would be MIA, presumed dead, during the Battle of the Eastern Solomos on August 24.

Butch O'Hare's gallantry was recognized by a Congressional Medal of Honor in Washington on April 21, the first Navy aviator so honored. FDR was there as Butch's wife hung the MoH around his neck. Butch was "good copy" for the media and toured the U.S., receiving a hero's welcome at each stop. He was promoted to lieutenant commander and would receive command of VF-3 from Thach on June 19, 1942. The squadron was based in Hawai'i, and his primary job was to get the new pilots ready for combat. One of them was "Whitey" Feightner, who became a test pilot after the War and was a close personal friend of Deputy Director Don Lopez. I had the pleasure of being in the audience when Whitey delivered NASM's Lindbergh lecture for 2011. There are numerous colorful stories about Butch from this time period; he clearly impressed a LOT of his colleagues!

O'Hare returned to combat in August, 1943. VF-3 had changed designation to VF-6, and was now based aboard the carrier *Independence*. They were now equipped with Grumman Hellcats, a big upgrade from the Wildcat. <u>Alex Vraciu</u> was his wingman, and would become quite famous later in the War, becoming the fourth-highest scorer in the Navy with 19 victories, including six during the "Marianas Turkey Shoot" on June 19, 1944.

Butch's first combat mission in the Hellcat was against Marcus Island on October 5, 1943. Five days later he led the squadron on a raid against Wake Island. He received a Gold Star in lieu of his second Navy Cross for those actions. He then became Commander Air Group for the *Enterprise*. VF-6 was divided between three new light carriers coming into service. The Enterprise then supported the invasions of Tarawa/Makin in November, 1943.

American ship defenses, both guns and planes, were proving too difficult for the Japanese to attack in the daytime, so they developed skills in using Betty bombers for night torpedo attacks at low altitude. RAdm Radford, Butch, and the Enterprise Air Officer cooked up some tactics to counter. Radar technology had advanced considerably since the start of the War, allowing primitive sets to be placed in larger aircraft, but they were too bulky and difficult to operate while flying for use by fighters. The idea was to have a team comprising a TBF Avenger with

radar and two Hellcats for firepower. The trio would be directed to the correct vicinity by *Enterprise*'s radar, then the two Hellcats would be guided to the target by the Avenger's radar. Several daytime experiments with this setup were conducted; one of the Hellcat pilots participating was "Butch" Voris, who was the founder and first commander of the Navy's Blue Angels exhibition team after the War.

The three-plane attack group was tested in action for the first time on November 26, 1943. A group of incoming Bettys was detected by *Enterprise's* radar, and the TBF and two Hellcats, one piloted by O'Hare, were launched.

SNAFU's abounded. The *Enterprise* FDO had trouble directing the trio to the target, and the Hellcats had trouble joining up on the Avenger. What happened next is still the subject of considerable discussion.

Butch knew that warplanes flying in close concert on an offensive mission, at night, with the prevailing technology was a recipe for friendly fire accidents. He knew he was close to, and behind, the Avenger, so he radioed the Avenger pilot to turn on his identification lights, since he might have been drawing a bead on the Avenger rather than one of the Bettys nearby. At the same time, the tail gunner of the Avenger saw both Butch's plane and a Betty behind him. The tail gunner opened fire, and says fire was returned from the Betty's dorsal turret. The tail gunner said he saw a parachute, but gallant Butch O'Hare was never seen again, in spite of an extensive search.

The Avenger tail gunner may have shot down Butch by mistake, and took some heat over the possibility. However, a detailed analysis by Steve Ewing and John Lundstrom, who interviewed the living survivors of the mission (the Avenger radar operator, the tail gunner, and the other Hellcat pilot), shows that the Japanese gunner, not the tail gunner, shot down Butch. John Lundstrom's in-depth research seems very trustworthy to me (here and in other WWII analyses), so I believe that the tail gunner was innocent.

O'Hare received a Purple Heart and a Navy Cross posthumously on November 26, 1944. A Navy destroyer was named in his honor (DD-889); his mother was the sponsor. Chicago's Orchard Depot Airport was, too (that's why O'Hare Airport's three-letter code is ORD). There is an F4F-3 aircraft, similar to one Butch flew on the *Lexington* on display there (it had been lost in a training accident and recovered from Lake Michigan in 1943).

CODA

Below find an interesting sidelight to both the Darwin and O'Hare stories above. It originally appeared as a Didja Know segment in A+StW for February 12-18, 2022.

Survivors of one of the ships sunk at Darwin, the *Florence D*, washed ashore on nearby Melville and Bathurst Islands. Others from that ship were rescued from the water by the Australian ship, <u>HMAS Wamambool</u>, on February 23. The island-bound survivors were rescued by a U.S.

Navy PBY flying boat, piloted by one Lt. Thomas H. Moorer. He would later become the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (1970-1974)!

Butch O'Hare had two sisters. Their parents divorced in 1927, and the children stayed with the mother in St. Louis while Butch's father went to Chicago, where he was one of Al Capone's lawyers. His father would eventually turn on Capone, and testify against him in the tax evasion case that sent Capone to Alcatraz. He was gunned down by Capone's thugs in retaliation. While he did do law work for Capone, he was not a made man in the family, in spite of the speculation that arose after his murder. This part of the Butch O'Hare story was covered in detail in Ewing and Lundstrom's book; the bones of the story are here.

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